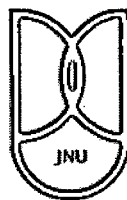


**WOMEN IN THEATRE: A CASE STUDY OF
NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHARY AND
THE PUNJABI THEATRE**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

SURBHI MAHAJAN



**CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL STUDIES
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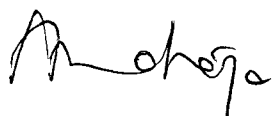


Certificate


This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**WOMEN IN THEATRE: A CASE STUDY OF NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHARY AND THE PUNJABI THEATRE**” is submitted by Surbhi Mahajan in partial fulfillment of requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is my original work and has not been previously submitted, in part or full, the award of any other degree of this or of any other university.


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Introduction

The concern for this dissertation largely academic and aesthetical in nature, emerged during my engagement with writing seminar papers indulging in issues related with gender and performance and women performers on stage. Since I had been already looking at women actresses on stage in colonial period in India, it propelled a simultaneous interest in reading more about theatre, the notions that define theatre and the performance tradition associated with theatre.

The main endeavor of the present study is to broadly focus upon women in theatre. Taking Punjab as the case in point, the dissertation intends to explore the relationship between gender and performance, thereby, looking at women dramatists in Punjabi theatre. Little has been written about women's theatre history. Especially in the context of theatre in Punjab, that it has led to misconceptions, such as, there are no women dramatists who have actively worked or are working in Punjabi theatre and that there is no drama and serious theatre in Punjab, to flourish. The latter part about the absence of serious theatre may not hold true. But the manner in which the available studies have been put together gives an overbearing impression of a male-dominant arena which partially stands out right when one talks of the initial stage. Especially the chapter (common to almost all the works) that talks about how Punjabi drama and theatre may be compartmentalized into various periods, for instance, first stage was from 1913-1947; second stage 1947-1975, so on and so forth. Post independence and moving forward towards the 1980s and 90s, the situation takes a new turn and one finds ample number of women practitioners involved in theatre. It is precisely in order to do away with these presumptions that it becomes important to undertake a study into history of women performers and women dramatists. Particularly in case of the latter (women dramatists), it is interesting to look at how they have been able to overcome the bounds of theatrical conventions and in the creative process have attempted to evolve a language of their own. This language is not necessarily 'feminist' in nature nor can this theatre be called as 'women's theatre'

literally, but it is innovative with a new sensibility infused in it. On a more specific note, the dissertation intends to study and analyze the kind of women characters that surface in the plays by both women directors (mostly) and playwrights. The dissertation however, is not confined within a time period as such. I shall be looking briefly at the pre-independence Punjabi theatre to get some sense of the way things were organized and how they worked; eventually shifting focus to the study of a random selection of plays and the stories they unfold.

The theme is not approached from one direction but different approaches have been used to give some sense of direction and a coherent structure to the study. A major part of the paper largely bases itself on a close study and understanding of plays by women directors and playwrights across India and eventually focuses attention on plays by women in Punjabi theatre. In this regard, I intend to take Neelam Mansingh Chaudhary and her works as part of the case study. The study is also based on personal narratives, observing plays, reading of texts and play scripts, all collected in the field. Apart from these, my interactions with both male and female dramatists, mostly in the form of interviews, also help form a better perspective about the larger workings of theatre in Punjab and otherwise. Looking at the use of interviews as the methodology for this part of the study, since there has been a strong tradition of critical attitude that memory is an unreliable historical source, there were initial apprehensions on my part about how reliable as a source these interviews would prove to be. But this was simultaneously coupled with an enthusiasm about recovering what was hitherto not available in the form of archival sources and written documents. In this sense, conducting interviews seemed a plausible and perfectly compatible solution. It further helped me look for answers to questions that particularly interested me. As Paul Thompson has argued, that oral history, as a methodology, allows the researcher a much wider scope and freedom to delve into issues. In addition, he states, “reality is complex and many-sided; and it is a primary merit of oral history that to a much greater extent than most sources it allows the original

multiplicity of viewpoints to be created.”¹ Using these interviews as entry points into the lives of the interviewees, the study, as it proceeds, tries and makes sense of their individual experience and its social context. They provided me with not only basic facts but also discover photographs which otherwise were unavailable. Oral History, in this sense, helped in a shift of focus and opened up important new areas of enquiry. At the same time, keeping in mind the problematic nature and the debates that surround its use, as an interactive process, these interviews helped a great deal in formulating a better understanding of the theme at hand.

The theme chosen may not come across as an outrightly historical project but as Nandi Bhatia² points out, that though the project of theatre is representative of fictional dramatization of events but given its visual focus, emphasis on collective participation, its mobility and spatial maneuverability definitely helps presenting alternative histories. In this sense the representational apparatus of theatre acquires special relevance. They may not be as authentic as accounts by historians. Similarly, through (*a reading of*) plays, it is possible to discern a great deal about attitudes, compulsions and values of a people by analyzing their stories even if they are fictive. (Frederick. C.Corey)

Undertaking a brief survey of the individual chapters in the sequence which has offered itself, the first chapter intends to begin with some wider conceptual issues related to gender in performing arts to have a better theoretical understanding of the theme at hand. The chapter attempts to read this issue in the context of colonial period in India whereby any connection between dance, theatre, and music on one hand, and women on the other hand was understood to be dubious. The point one is trying to make is that the manner in which gender is constructed in society; it enters the performance arena and the images of who performs what and how, come from and further creates a climate in which gender roles are defined and redefined and also shapes the performance according to the time.

¹ Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the Past- Oral History”, in *The Oral History Reader* ed., by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, Routledge, 2006, p28.

² Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/ Resistance*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p3.

This is followed by the section intended for a discussion on women and the performance scene in India. Speaking in the context of theatre and the colonial period, it is the body of the woman performer on stage that falls prey to this prevailing ideology of gender. The actress is seen as synonymous with a prostitute. The Indian woman exists in a double bind as a female succumbed to the gender hierarchy of her own culture and further colonized by the so-called morals prescribed by the British colonial enterprise. In case of Punjab as well, given the circumstance of ideological conflict with the colonial state over the position of women, the issue of women's morality was undoubtedly important. Following this study, one may also find it interesting to look at the fact that these gender markings were not restricted to the Indian society only as mentioned above. Irrespective to society one sees striking resemblances of these differentiations in other societies as well such as French, Victorian Britain and so on and so forth. In the second section a comparative perspective helps us gain a sense of similar movements across cultures and different time frames.

With this understanding in view the second chapter shifts focus from women performers onstage to women practitioners behind the scenes. By women practitioners I mean women playwrights and directors. Playwriting and direction, both the jobs have been male prerogative in theatre for as far as one can think. It is only with time and efforts of revolutionary organizations like Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the new perceptions of theatre as an avenue of artistic endeavor and not merely an avenue to get easy employment, that women from middle classes have had the degree of freedom, though very minimal, to be able to come on stage. So much so that they could think about going beyond the 'restrictive' boundaries of stage and take up jobs such as playwriting and direction that were hitherto only confined to their respective male counterparts. With regards to the existing body of literature on the subject, by far the most comprehensive contributions in this direction are by Lakshmi Subramaniam in her edited work *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*. The book tries to look into question that to what extent one's gender has an influence on one's work

and artistic decisions? Does gender really affect their authority? A question seriously looked at by theatre academicians. But what appears is this tendency to often compare the male point of view with that of their female counterparts. This dissertation in this sense wants to do away with this recurring theme and attempts to study women practitioners' experiences and the issues that concern them collectively and individually. As Kirti Jain³ points out and rightly so that this needs to be done not by way of comparison to men's work, but as independent exploration of what they are doing to their language of creative idiom which stems from their own perception.⁴ In other words, gender should not be seen as the determining factor in the creative process at all times because it tends to undermine in some way the creative process itself. At this point the question one also may look at is to what extent are there clear departures from the accepted mode of theatrical language as argued? The answer to this would be largely based on interviews with women in theatre itself since published academic studies are rare apart from the often limited work of magazines and selected journals. Having said that on the other side of this chapter I seek to shed light on a random group of female-authored plays across India and across different time frames, one that reveals the attitudes and ideologies shaping their depiction of female characters. What do they have to say through their craft? In the context of modern Indian theatre marked by cross-cultural manifestations, the location of women in theatre is complex and demands a flexible approach.

Before we proceed to analyze works by women in Punjabi theatre, it seems imperative to engage ourselves with a brief study and understanding of theatre space in Punjab as it was during the colonial period. More than often Bengali and Marathi theatre have been the target of academic research while other theatrical spaces have been deprived of the academic attention or somewhat managed to survive on the periphery. By other theatrical spaces I mean the category of 'regional theatre' which is largely used for theatres of north India, south India,

³ Kirti Jain is a theatre director and teaches at the National School of Drama, New Delhi.

⁴ Kirti, Jain. "Different Concerns, Striking Similarities", in *Theatre India*, National School of drama, No3. May 2001, p22.

and others. One may argue that this could be largely a result of the fact that even much before independence, the cities of Calcutta and Bombay were centers of political activity and therefore the dramatic activity eventually came to be concentrated there. Perhaps one needs to keep in mind that theatre did not grow with the same pace and to the same extent everywhere. Therefore, instead of a uniform process, modern theatre grew at different levels in different languages and regions of the country. However, not diminishing its significance, drama and theatre did exist in Punjab and only gradually with time have been able to establish themselves in a positive manner. The chapter however is completely based on the secondary sources in the form of literature written by well-versed theatre practitioners and academicians based in Punjab. A reading suggests that a very simple format and language has been used to make these works more accessible to get a homogenous understanding of Punjabi drama and theatre. I would also like to point out that one might not hail these works as highly sophisticated and intellectually competent literature but the manner in which facts and details seem to have been incorporated, possibly helps any interested reader to get indulged. Perhaps a translation of these works would be a better way to get more people to learn about them since they are all written in gurmukhi. Outside Punjab, there is hardly any research undertaken that throws light on Punjabi theatre as such and what is even more perplexing is that renowned institutions like the National School of Drama in New Delhi, barring one or two articles, does not really report the current happenings related to theatre as it does for other cities.

However, not getting discouraged by the paucity of material available, looking at this space, the present chapter is divided into broadly two sub-sections. The first section looks at drama in Punjab emerging in the form of oral-narrative tradition, the folk-religious theatre survived as a performing art in what was known as the country of Punjab covering a vast region from Kashmir in the north to Rajasthan in the northwest, not forgetting the districts of Lahore, Rawalpindi and other areas of Pakistan Punjab. In this regard Richard C. Temple's *Legends of the Panjab* presents itself to be a very important primary source. A book compiled and

written in 1884 contains several scripts of the popular theatrical form *swang*, the earliest to be thus documented. It is a collection of what are known as old wives' tales in the form of popular legends recited and sung by various bards across the region of Panjab. The play, *swang*, is a sort of semi-religious metrical play in which episodes from the lives of celebrated heroes is depicted. Partly recited and partly performed by professional ballad singers or a company of male actors at the occasion of festivals like Holi, Dussehra, Basant. In some sense it is these varied folk forms that have managed to survive over such a long period of time that only further provides Punjabi theatre today with a healthy space full of vibrancy and dynamism so much so that there is an apparent consciousness among dramatists, both male and female, of the hold that these traditional narratives and legends have on contemporary consciousness especially in the works of Neelam Mansingh, but at the same time there is a marked inclination to review and reconstruct. Having said that, the second part largely forms a study of beginning of modern drama and theatre in Punjab as started by the great Nohra Richards in 1912, also known as the 'grandmother' of modern Punjabi theatre. An Irish lady influenced by her own theatre tradition back home was the first one to sow the seeds of Punjabi *rangmanch* and probably the one to recognize the need of drama in Punjabi language. Thus started a phase of theatre which was amateur in nature and probably still is. At the same time, given the anti-colonial sentiment of the period and within that, drama being distinctively used as a medium to arouse nationalism and counter colonialism, the kind of theatre that came into existence may be perceived as a cultural response to the colonial rule. Plays like *Suhag* (1913), *Subhadra* (1920), and *Lily Da Vyah* (1928) by I.C.Nanda were informed with a spirit of social reform, an important component of nationalism all over the country. But while theatre was used as a portent means to express sentiments and opinions and especially during the reform movements, whereby women became an integral subject matter of the imperialist-nationalist debates, women were not part of these debates whether held in public or onstage. Speaking in the context of Punjab, if we take a serious look, it would appear that women were conspicuous by their absence not only on the Punjabi stage in particular but also by their

absence from theatre writing and management until the late 1940s in general. In this sense, Shiela Bhatia's autobiography presents itself as an important source for it largely reflects on Punjabi theatre of 1930s and 40s and beyond. Through IPTA's platform, she was able to organize a language viable enough to invoke (a) relationship between drama and themes related to political and social issues affecting the Indian masses. This was evident in the innovative and experimental dramas deeply rooted in indigenous popular traditions across India. In this sense, as a source, perspective autobiographical essays put their work in the context of their lives and their lives in the context of their times. A quick study perhaps would show that like other theatrical cultures, theatre in Punjab forms an integral part of the Punjabi society. As Girish Karnad rightly points out, "Every theatre is rooted in the culture of its own language, so there are as many theatre situations as there are languages."⁵ While it has been impacting the society by raising questions, it has also been getting influenced by the diverse waves prevalent in the society and in turn evolving at its own pace.

A succinct discussion brings us to the next chapter in line which involves a detailed study of plays by renowned theatre figure and a successful woman director Neelam Mansingh Chaudhary. She is a talented and innovative director in her own right, who not only has done pioneering work in women's theatre in general but has also earned considerable amount of appreciation for her work in relation to Punjabi theatre. I foray into this chapter not with an intention of defending her against those being very critical of her work. The fact that presence of women in Punjabi theatre has been marginal for a very long time both onstage and offstage, Neelam Mansingh's work especially her productions require special mention for their pleasant mix of the traditional and the modern and situating them in the broader context of Punjabi culture. She has often been criticized for often adapting and 'borrowing' from the west and not really producing anything essentially Punjabi. Nonetheless, Neelam Mansingh has proved her worth as an able and effective woman director. Coming to her plays, consisting of

⁵ Girish Karnad. "Theatre in India", *Daedalus*, 118. No4, 1989, p332.

Nagamandala, *Yerma*, *Fida* and *Kitchen Katha*, as examples, it is possible to arrive at a pattern that runs parallel in all of them. A look at the female characters of Rani, Yerma, Fida, Chand Kaur, and Queen Kulmeet suggests the narratives of young women in traditional relationships manifesting unflinching loyalty to their respective husbands. They are confined within traditional, rural patriarchal structures underlying what is expected of them- morality, high virtues, and a certain kind of behavior. But what makes these characters interesting is a complex movement away from 'decorum and encased representation' towards a narrative of female self discovery. In all the plays, women portrayed are romantic souls with volatile and dynamic personalities. Though many of these works might seem revisionist in the sense of revising mythic and legendary figures, but what becomes visible in the adapted versions is a gamut of female experiences ranging from anger and deception to tenderness and hope.

By way of conclusion I attempt to look at new avenues and directions for women in Punjabi theatre today. As mentioned above I intend to probe into this issue largely by conducting interviews with women directors (mostly) and playwrights across Punjab for as theatre practitioners they seem to, as a consequence of empowering themselves and other women through theatre, have simultaneously improved the position and treatment of women working in (Indian) theatre; evolved new representations and images of women in performance, and contributed new ways of writing, directing, performing, and theorizing about the art of theatre.⁶

Pertaining to the brief discussion pieced together, the study as a generic treatise hopes to form a sufficing account of an enterprising theatre and its high spirited and buoyant women practitioners full of zeal, dynamism, and a driving urge to explore the uncharted territories. At the same time I believe that the dissertation has enlarged the scope for further probing into the subject.

⁶ Reviewed work(s); Diane Daugherty, *Women Theatre Activists of India: Interview*, 1997 by Betty Bernhard; Kailash Pandeya. *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol.15, No32, autumn, 1998, p313.

Chapter One

Gender and Performance: Some theoretical Concepts

I begin with a background chapter on the understanding of the beginnings of women as performers on stage; whether as actresses or dancers for it furnishes an important context which shall allow us a further discussion of women dramatists in theatre in India and particularly in Punjab.

India presents a fascinating history of an unbroken cultural tradition since ancient times and continues to contribute to the world of arts and culture even today. Women have played, undoubtedly, an important role in keeping intact the precious tradition; but not without a struggle. Speaking in context of the Indian performing culture, coming out of temples and noble men's courts, the performing arts of dance, music and theatre have come a long way and with this its performer, one of the most essential component of the performing arts, has also crossed numerous hurdles and challenges. They are now assured of a respectable audience, though not always art connoisseurs, but at least appreciative of what is being performed and by whom it is being performed. However, the situation was not smooth for the performers in the pre-independence period. Particularly for the women performers, life was not a bed of roses.

An amazing corpus of literature available shows how much has been written and said about women in general and the way the women's question has been handled especially, it does reflect an amazing note of gender consciousness. What comes forth is the awareness of women's oppression in the society, highlighting the plight of uneducated women as victims of patriarchal structures, but nonetheless, most of the writings represent the interests of the middle-class women and the issues related to their domestic lives. The other sections of women within the general category of the female gender get ignored or marginalized. And it is these sections, in this context, the female performer, that the chapter intends to look at.

As Mary F. Brewer urges that, “it is not only a struggle between women and the male dominated society but also among the different sections of women.”⁷

Gender in Performing Arts:

To begin with, one may ask a question “What kind of problem does being a woman pose”⁸ especially in the arena of performance arts? The chapter would try and answer this question in the context of colonial period in India whereby any connection between dance, theatre, and music on one hand, and women on the other hand was understood to be dubious.

In order to understand this we need to perhaps begin with the fact that an attempt to understand gender construction in a society is of special significance. Gender as a category, it has been argued widely, has been constructed socially and culturally as opposed to sex which is determined biologically. Gender is not simply the gender one is, that is, male or female, but also a set of meanings, organized as masculine or feminine, and further made to match the male and female bodies respectively.⁹ Whereas sex refers to biological phenomena, sex role or gender denotes their cultural, psychological, and social correlates: the rules, expectations, and behavior appropriate to being male or female within a particular society. Its public and private expressions are scripted.¹⁰ For instance, there are a set of traits which help us identify what is the proper male or female behavior and it is against these set of sex-related traits that one comes to understand the specific gender roles. Judith Lynne Hannah in one of her important works *Dance, Sex, and Gender* talks of concepts of sex and gender as conveyed by dance images in context of America. What is interesting is the fact that these attributes apply across cultures and are experienced commonly by all societies across the globe. In this sense women are understood as “nurturers”, “moral”, “dependent, passive,

⁷ Mary E. Brewer, *Race, Sex, Gender and Contemporary Theatre*, Sussex Academic Press, 1999.

⁸ Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, Columbia University Press, 2001, p1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p2.

¹⁰ Judith Lynne Hannah, *Dance, Sex, and Gender*, The University of Chicago Press, 1988. p.7.

cooperative”, “hearth, home, school”, whereas men are identified in terms of “supporters”, “pragmatic”, “marketplace, bureaucracy”, and so on and so forth. However, there is a difference in the context of dance and especially between America and India. While in the former case, it was the male participation in theatrical dance that was unacceptable because it was widely felt that to dance was female. In the latter case, women were not acceptable, while male dancers and *nattuvanars* were highly respected. Therefore, one needs to be cautious of the fact that what is acceptable in one culture and historical period may be unacceptable in another.

In the context of this study, it would be interesting to understand how construction of gender in society also permeates the arena of performance and this would provide us with an important theoretical base to further our understanding of women and performing arts.

Hannah in her book tries to draw out a complex relationship between sex, gender and dance in the context of America and attitudes about being a man or woman in a dance performance. The aim of the book is to “enrich the discourse on male/female body images and social change by spotlighting and clarifying how gender is socially and culturally constructed and transformed in a critical medium of human communication - the dance”¹¹ (in this case). She argues that the way society generally designates occupations according to the sex and prescribes the specific gender activities, these gender roles also figure out in the performance arena on stage. She writes “the cultural construction of gender options as they are played out in the production and visual imagery of dance.” Taking America in the 20th century as her case in point, the way women’s role have been defined as passive nurturers of life, the fact that they took up dance as a career, which in a way challenges the already prescribed gender patterns in society, they were not treated with respect. Public theatre and dance performance on stage objectified women’s bodies in association with prostitution and even belonging to a class of

¹¹ *Ibid.*

people on the fringes of respectability in a society. Interestingly, in fact that the art of dance was considered feminine in nature, men in dance came to be associated with homosexuality and it was considered low for men to dance, a space which thus came to be associated with women belonging to lower ranks of society. And it was the 'inferior' female predominantly dancing onstage.

The point one is trying to make is that the manner in which gender is constructed, it also enters the performance arena and the images of who performs what and how come from and further creates a climate in which gender roles are defined and redefined and also shapes the performance according to the time. Taking the example of India in the first half of 20th century, when national consciousness was at its zenith, the kind of performances that were done reflected images of rising patriotic fervor be it in the kinds of dramas that were being performed or in the realm of music of famous poet Subramaniam Bharati who wrote poems that mirrored the anger against the alien British rule and the heightened spirit to fight for our freedom.

Having said that, it would be interesting to look at the fact that these gender markings were not restricted to the American society only as mentioned above. Irrespective of society, one sees striking resemblances of these differentiations in other societies as well such as French, Victorian Britain, and particularly India where it is the woman performer who falls prey to the prevailing ideology of gender.

Women in Indian Performing Arts:

One came to realize that position of women in theatre was not the only sphere where this class was wronged and maligned against under the impact of colonial modernity. In the case of Indian classical dance, the devadasi system was also done away with primarily because the temple dancers came to be viewed as prostitutes. Similarly, in the case of music, even though the women were not condemned in the same manner and music was considered an important part of

girl's education and further adding to the prospects of marriage, yet in the so-called shift from the private courts to the public stage, women's training was not meant to train into a professional. Instead, they were mobilized in terms as an instrument to elevate the devotional element and teach bhakti songs to other women.¹²

Intricacies of the colonial power structures came to be combined with already deeply embedded Indian attitudes. But the question one needs to ask is did these gender attitudes have pre-colonial roots or was the politics of gender representation a phenomena that emerged specifically during the colonial period? Clearly, as discussed above, even in the Indian case, a woman was situated in the home in a subordinate position to a father figure or a husband and the only choice open to her was to marry and procreate. Passivity, self-sacrifice, and dependence were celebrated as the cardinal virtues of an ideal Indian woman. A spectrum of identifiable images have been constructed around the person of Indian woman such as that of a mother, wife, daughter and ways of moving in a society that created the idea of what is respectable and what is not. And those women who did not conform to these labels were outside the society. As Kumkum Sangari and Vaid write, "womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, and not an actual, cultural continuity."¹³ 'Woman' does not exist as a specific socio-historical female space, rather it is a discursive space- a site upon which issues of class, race, sexuality, and gender are constructed combined with structural constraints under which women live, what they are able or allowed to be in a society.¹⁴ However, concerns about political and moral corruption about representation of women only worsened the situation during the colonial period.

¹² Reference taken from Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of the Indian Classical Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹³ *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian History*, ed. K. Sangari and S. Vaid, Rutgers University Press, 1989, p.17.

¹⁴ Brewer, 1999.

Women's accomplishments in the area of performance were affected by these very attitudes of the power institutions that women have met stubborn resistance in their quest to justify their status as professional performers and not merely entertainers. And while tracing the history of women performers one finds repeated evidence of historical-cultural attitudes that nourished an environment hostile to women as professional performers trying to chart out their lives out of these 'tainted' professions.

I use the terms *women performers* or *female performers* in a broad sense to include performers of most sorts but at the same time to be also clear of the fact that each of these categories of women performers as actresses, dancers, and musicians has their own specific history. Yet I group them together in order to bring forth the commonality in the way they are treated by the society. Therefore, the attempt is to look at these performers set in different geographical locations and belonging to diverse genres of performances. At the moment I am not trying to limit the study to a set time period. Rather, the idea is to understand that there seems to be nothing more natural and pleasing than women appearing on stage and performing their gentle movements and convincing role playing. Yet they were always devoid of the kind of respect and prominence enjoyed by their male counterparts. In this sense one of the primary issues here is of the interplay of gender and performance. As Lenard R. Berlanstein writes, "To a larger degree, the representation of women performers entailed conflicts about female and male identities (...) set the terms in which these women performers would be imagined."¹⁵

Taking Indian theatre in colonial period as the case in point, amidst the development, achievement and encouragement, an interesting observation that comes to fore is that theatre related activities like management, organization, etc., very much remained a male dominated domain from Bengali bhadralok families to Marwaris owning theatre houses. But to make it more venturesome the most

¹⁵ Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, Harvard University Press, 2001, p.4.

important insertion was made with the much controversial entry of female actresses on the public stage. Bengali theatre probably, the most advanced and powerful theatre of the country because it was and it remained the focus of serious political and cultural activities for many years, was the first to attract the women performers. Similarly, in Maharashtra, where in the traditional *natya*, the Tamasha, the women had been performing for very long time, on the modern stage the female roles were always performed by men. The question thus, one needs to ask is why a sudden need was felt to introduce female performers? Once introduced, why were they both marginalized and undervalued by the society? Why did they never receive their due share in terms of respect offstage while some got recognition for their performance? One could argue that because this was an essentially public medium and a social art, involving the communication of ideology through living images; it tends to convey the ideology of the group that is dominant as producers and consumers of the images. Therefore, theatre in this context was primarily a middle class enterprise with women languishing on sidelines.

In the history of the Indian theatre, despite getting elevated professionally, they (women) were never able to get the social respectability that was strictly confined to the so-called respectable women of the middle class families. What is interesting is that this was true for all the female performers in general irrespective of which region they belonged to. Though their entry into the theatre may have varied with time, but the prevalent perception about them lacking 'culture', seen as 'characterless ladies', 'lost to society' for living outside the conventional standards maintained by society, was commonly maintained by the deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes.

Theatre, as mentioned above, was a potent mean of expressing views and sentiments and other issues that concerned the overall make-up of the Indian society. It is fascinating and yet surprising that while dramas and plays were being

written dealing with issues of widow remarriage, women's education, child marriage etc. they were primarily performed by men with not a single woman in sight. Contextualizing these attitudes various scholars have pointed out that despite the fact that women became the subject-matter of imperialist-nationalist debates, they were not a part of these discussions (held in the public sphere) for a very long time, whether in politics or on stage. Interestingly, throughout these debates while the need for them to get out in the public sphere was vociferously articulated but once they did come out, in this case as women actresses, they were strongly rejected and despised. Acting as a profession was considered as an unusual socio-economic category¹⁶, which was not respectable enough. The fact that they did not adhere to the defined normative rules for female sexuality, activity and intellect they were not merited with the social respectability and virtually by definition lived and worked beyond the boundaries of propriety."¹⁷ They were considered as fallen women with no morals. The result of this deeply embedded perception vis-à-vis the actresses as 'immoral' women, was a sharp distinction that came to be made between them and the married women of the respectable *bhadralok* families. This in turn led to widespread repression of women's popular culture.

Sumanta Banerjee¹⁸ writes that the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century was a period of new socio-cultural milieu whereby the deeply impacted English-educated middle class men began to introspect into the indigenous society and traditional institutions and the most important aspect of this rational inquiry was to educate women, empower them, and work towards their upliftment. Parallel to this commonly shared conviction amongst reformers (all men), there was also a simultaneous attempt towards setting down certain common standards of behavior and cultural norms. The reformers were very

¹⁶ Minoti Chatterjee, "Creatures of the Sub-World", in Vijaya Ramaswamy ed. *Researching Indian Women*, p337.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p338.

¹⁸ Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in 19th Century", in Sangari and Vaid ed. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial India*, Kali, 1989.

selective about what western ideas to accept and what to reject. A fundamental degree of reservation was prevalent towards maintenance caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority.¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee²⁰ argues, that the nationalist discourse proposed two spheres in the domain of culture. The material or the outer sphere, *bahar*, wherein they could imitate the west and they further equated this with the domain that would be dominated by the male. Whereas the spiritual or the inner sanctum, *ghar*, was the area that would be dealt with by the Indians themselves and the colonial state must not be allowed to intervene. It came to be equated with the domestic space, which was the preserve of women. Thus came into being the differentiation between genders and allocation of their social role and space; and this was the manner in which the reformers came to answer the women's question. The problem was solved in accordance with the overarching nationalist ideology and considerably modified by the patriarchal norms of traditional society. In the process, the new *bhadramahila* was created and her education was not essentially to westernize her, but which would enable her to be able to afford a new identity without disturbing her place at home.

At the same time while this 'official culture' was being propagated, a new kind of segregation was imposed on women because redefinition of the female was a crucial feature of the hegemony that brought the middle classes into power and their (women) new identity was now to be defined in opposition to women from lower economic strata.²¹ As a result, the popular culture, which was shared by women from all the sections, now came to be looked down upon as 'vulgar,' 'bawdy,' and 'immoral'. The female performer stigmatized in educated discourse as a 'prostitute' and denied access to former sources of support and carried her

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Partha Chatterjee. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" in *Recasting Women* ed., by Sangari and Vaid, Kali, 1989.

²¹ Lata Singh, "Gender and Theatre: Looking Beyond Mainstream Canon", in *Exploring Gender Equations: Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, ed. Shakti Kak and Biswamoy Pati, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2005, p308.

marginalization with her.²² In this sense, one sees that cultural emancipation came to acquire a slightly different meaning.

To take a minute and examine the situation in Punjab, which was no different in the colonial milieu. Reform movements in Punjab in the colonial period were equally pivotal to gender construction and the power dynamics that surrounded the whole discourse. They in a way recreated and reinvented a new social fabric. As discussed above the women's question had already taken centre stage. In this sense female identity within the legitimate space of domesticity was manifested in the functional aspects of a woman's life whereby her reproductive role was accorded a high status. On the other hand identity of woman outside the parameters of domesticity became a loaded sphere of moral values and judgmental comments. The construction of moral woman was pitted against its counterpart the 'immoral' woman. With regards to the *nautch* girls, the dancing girls were an important aspect of celebration and performance in Punjab. However, as a result of the new attitudes, the segregation between the good and the bad became more streamlined resulting in many restrictions on the public movement largely confined to women of educated middle-class. Distance between the urban, educated elite and the common people became more pronounced.

To give an example, an extract called "Raise Your Woman" from the Khalsa Advocate defines the very agenda the Sikh reform organizations had in mind. It read:

"Nearly all our social difficulties arise out of two things: the caste and the status of women. It is, indeed, a matter of great regret and humiliation that our womankind are, with few exceptions, wrapped up in the pitchy darkness of ignorance. Though people are self-possessed with what they are inspiring to

²² *Ibid.*, p303.

be, in the moral and social spheres, without raising their status by giving them proper education in order to make them good wives and ideal mothers. We cannot rise or enable the humanity to ascend to the highest flight of evolution by degrading the female numbers of society and designate them with whatever bad name we like. The aim in the education of women must be, as eloquently pointed out by the Tikha Singh of Nabha, to create the new woman after prototypes of Sita, Savitri adorned with the qualities that she has received from her ancestors of the brilliant past and her sisters of the West. They should be trained in general departments of learning, taught holy books, pure doctrine of morality, domestic duties and other fine arts such as music, etc. which shall prove useful to her in her after life.”²³

Quite clearly, the idea behind writing of such articles seems to be one of propagating and supervising the lives of women and making them aware of their supreme responsibility as carriers of modern values and moral respectability. Both Anshu Malhotra and Doris Jakobsh in their respective works on gender in Punjab have looked at the reform initiative taken up by various organizations directed towards women.²⁴ The former does so by looking at the popular literature in the form of ‘kissas’ and ‘jhagrras’ and those written and produced by reform bodies. Thus studying how the new emerging middle-class was grappling with the question of woman and striving to recast the most intricate aspects of their lives that required displacement and reorganization of woman’s popular traditions, rituals specific to them, women’s identity markers, and rites pertaining to notions of sacred space and time. She points out that the ‘woman problem’ assumed its importance, because they were seen to be the begetters of the new generation of

²³ *Khalsa Advocate*, “Raise Your Women”, 30th June, 1911, Friday.

²⁴ These works attempt to study gender constructs though informed by the British administrators in Punjab but subsequently taken up by reform organizations that moulded the form and content to suit their purpose while retaining their positions of power and leadership. Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, Religious Identity; Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* and Doris Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

men- the creators, in this direct but critical way, of a new nation.²⁵ Jakobsh's work, on the other hand, puts before us a theoretical analysis of gender construction as a variable in social organization. She looks at the traces of Sikh identity formation which, in turn, was critically intertwined with the woman's question. The principles of 'silence', 'negation', 'accommodation', and 'idealization' formed the general framework within which the discourse took place. In this context, the Singh Sabha reform movement assumes foremost significance in charting out an educational program meant for the upliftment of its women. The patterns were intended to modernize the Punjabi woman and bring her close to the image of the 'Victorian woman'. And so the reforms were initiated but only to an extent that they did not endanger their (reformers') own position. While the reformers were ensuing for a modern and morally responsible woman, this concern was concomitant with a fear of a liberated and emancipated woman, which would then mean a subversion of 'tradition', and therefore, a loss of identity. Thus, one can see that the reformist attitude was often surrounded by a sense of dilemma about how to define the form and content of the reform program. Whatever the reform agenda, it certainly had implications and one such effect was evident in the sphere of theatrical activity in Punjab as its performative requirements necessitated breaching of private space-public space divide etched out by the reform agenda.

Reverting back to theatre, after these women performers from the lower strata were sent into exile, however a need was felt to introduce them back into mainstream culture. There was a debate in the early twentieth century in various journals and newspapers whether women should be allowed an entry. Once again the debate was surrounding the issue concerning women, but it was primarily conducted and participated in by urban middle-class men. The initial stand taken by the so-called upholders of morality justified the exclusion of women performers from the mainstream theatre on the grounds that these women lacked

²⁵ Anshu Malhotra, "The Moral Woman and the Urban Punjabi Society", in *Social Scientist*, Vol.20, No5/6, May-June 1992, p.44.



‘culture’, which can be maintained by only avoiding their degrading gestures. But as the public theater grew more and more popular attracting vast audiences, in order to retain this attraction as well as the commercial viability within the changing society, the patriarchal system now came to justify their inclusion.²⁶

The debate began with the growing dissatisfaction in society towards the female impersonators (males enacting female roles). Though the possibility of women as actresses was rethought, women as playwrights, company owners, etc. were not considered. They wanted to cater to the mass appeal, but at the same time maintain strict confines. Thus it came to be decided that the only possibility was of ‘prostitutes’ as actresses.

It is an interesting observation that the notion of ‘prostitution’ as any sexual activity outside marriage came to be cemented under the British Raj.²⁷ For instance, in Tamil Nadu, all the above mentioned discourses came together in the social movement that began in Madras in the late nineteenth century whereby, the devadasi dancers were accused of prostitution, whether they sold sexual favors or not.²⁸

There were many voices rising up against having women on stage. First of all, how could such women of disrepute come to enact the roles of goddesses, thus, trying to justify their exclusion on grounds of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution?’ It was also argued that if women and men came together in ‘vulnerable’ plays like that of Radha and Krishna, morals would be adversely affected. At the same time, it was strongly felt that women performers were necessary for the survival of theatrical tradition as a whole. Therefore, a reluctant consent was given to the ‘prostitutes’ but with a precondition that they should be ‘*neeteeman*’- fit into the moral

²⁶ Lata Singh, 2005.

²⁷ Susan Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*. Routledge, 2005. p4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p4.

standard of society.²⁹ Theatre thus came to be recognized as an increasingly middle-class enterprise with women actresses only in supportive roles. Changes in social attitudes came about due to combination of more realism in techniques of production, and in the contents of play that demanded greater visibility of women.³⁰ Above all, it was more out of the need to elevate the theatre trade that women actresses came to be seen as saleable commodities. But once brought on stage, they were all caste in roles like Sita, Draupati, Shankutala – all humiliated and then rehabilitated – not immodest or promiscuous, yet they were perceived that way.³¹ They were often caste in such stereotyped representations because these were submissive and supportive in nature and it gave the men an upper hand, always trying to regulate them and imposing roles on them, resulting into an overall suppression of their identity.

Having said that, the next section primarily focuses on an enlightening corpus of literature available on the subject. For this purpose, I will be reading into the texts of four books respectively. In order to bring to light their (performers’) story and making them an integral part not only of mainstream history but also complementing them for their lives, that was significant in its own way. For this purpose it would be interesting to study these women performers spread over various regions of India bringing with them the peculiarities of that region and their individual talents, all combined together to have a comprehensive understanding of women performers as a collective identity.

In this sense the carefully researched study of the *Nautanki* theatre in North India by Kathryn Hansen in *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* proves to be an important work. *Nautanki*, a popular genre of theatre played a significant role in the cultural and social processes of the period. Hansen defines the boundaries of the *Nautanki* theatre and situates it within the descriptive

²⁹ Neera Adarkar, “In Search of Women in Marathi Theatre”, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 26, 1991.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pws-89.

³¹ Ralph Yarrow, *Indian Theatre*, p91-92.

framework of “the immensely varied field of theatre in South Asia.” Hansen draws on theory from feminist and cultural studies to highlight the social and moral codes articulated through this performance genre. In this sense, attention to the issues of women performers and representation of women in the *Nautanki* texts form a special feature of the book. With the entry of women performers, the question of morality became more pronounced. It was a forbidden and a dangerous arena because of actresses’ association with it. As discussed above, the problem of stigmatization of women performers in this genre was largely a result of their trespassing the male ‘public’ space, thus subverting the gender conventions of the society_and as a result being seen as synonymous with prostitutes. Kathryn Hansen writes, “Women are valued for their domestic labour and for their reproductivity (...) since the social construction of gender places “good women in seclusion, women who appear in public spaces (such as on stage) are defined as “bad”. Subjected to the gaze of many men, they belong not to one, like a loyal wife, but to all.”³²

As opposed to the officially approved performance genre of modern India, *Nautanki* theatre on a whole was not seen as powerful and prestigious as the modern theatre situated in the urban cities, the seat of political power. It came under the category of the traditional or more aptly the secular form of theatre and as a result was seen as the theatre of ordinary people and formed an important element of the popular culture in the countryside. However, Hansen problematizes the distinctions between ‘folk culture’ and ‘urban culture’ situating *Nautanki* as an “intermediary theatre”. Thus not undermining its importance, it has come to contribute significantly to the formation of North Indian culture and provided the people with fun and entertainment and “grounds for play in their daily working lives.”

While Hansen’s work is a rich and analytical description of what she calls an

³² Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds For Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*, University of California Press, 1992. p23.

“intermediary theatre”, from its genesis in the 16th century as a distinct dramatic form to its representation of women to the significant changes that have taken place over a period of time, the book does not give us an ethnographic account as opposed to the much attention given to the dramatic texts. One does not get an active image of live *Nautanki* performances although she rightly insists that any reading of a literary text must be accompanied by “an observed or documented performance practice.”³³ But keeping this absence aside, the book provides us with a rich historical and literary study of “a historically specific set of practices located in an evolving social environment.”

Interrelated with the study of a marginalized genre may be linked another interesting study of, a similar yet unique, performance genre of Special Drama, which is a popular theatrical form just like *Nautanki*, situated in South India. *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* by Susan Siezer, as opposed to Hansen’s work, is a sensitive ethnographic account of Special Drama and its artists. The study is textured by a number of key themes that range from a discussion of the history of this particular performance genre and the way the performers have come to live their lives by its standards as well as the standards of the society in which this genre is practiced. It is interesting to point to the fact that in a society which is strongly matriarchal in nature, patriarchal structures find their way through to present the female as submissive. But our concern here is to look at how the Special Drama actresses get doubly stigmatized for belonging to this popular tradition which is seen as ‘vulgar’ as compared to the urban Tamil stage at one level, and lacking what is often called the ‘Tamil culture’ because of their bawdy comedy and going against the gender norms of the Tamil society at another level. By performing publicly and interacting with unknown men, they transcend the boundaries of reputability. One of the reasons where the book differs from other accounts of female performers is that Seizer is not trying to show how much these actresses are oppressed. She does not romanticize their oppression. Instead she points out how these artists allow themselves a space within this public space to

³³*Ibid.*, p260.

come up with strategies that would help them counter the daily humiliation. Seizer writes, “through their embodied practices actresses comply with the powers that stigmatize them only in such a way that their perceived compliance manages to expand their possibilities for making their home in the world.”³⁴

A close encounter with the artists and a documentation of several performances as part of an extensive field work makes the work significant in its own because of a lack of any substantial literature about Special Drama. In this sense it may be seen as a monumental account of how culture shapes the most intimate selves, bodies and the ways people move in a society. Her methodology includes meticulous interviews with drama artists, their agents in order to construct a serious narrative about the Special Drama network, viewing of several performances, and conversations with the spectators who are equally responsible in constructing the identity of women performers as the historical and cultural factors are. The methodology proves to be significant as Seizer does not enter with any preconceived notion about Special Drama and comes with her interpretation via inquiry which no doubt can be subjective, yet important in understanding the meanings and cultural practices of people who are the object of the study. But the question does arise then that how far the research is valid if it is colored by the researcher’s experiences. Perhaps one must exercise critical judgment when using this method of historical documentation.

Despite their differences in terms of their choice of frames of references, both Hansen and Seizer, have tried to convey the same point about how gender norms come to define the women performers irrespective of society. And since patriarchy is a universal phenomenon clubbed with the historical, cultural, and ideological factors of the time, in context, that further go on to perpetuate the ideology of gender. In this case, the woman performer may be located within the larger “reformist discourse that resulted from the colonial experience pushing the

³⁴ Seizer, 2005, p327.

art form to the margins of respectability.”³⁵

To summarize, the early 20th century reformer’s zeal was focused on ‘purifying’ the polity by purging the ‘degraded’ forms of culture, and the performing arts was one such area that came to be looked down upon because of its association with the devadasi women. This was also a period of a struggle to represent the ideal female behavior. The Indian woman whom the new middle-class male desired, modeled on the British standards of ideal womanly conduct, was the good housewife whose nemesis was the figure of the low-class female performer. Integrally associated with the reformist agenda was the ideology steeped in revivalist vision as well as in a critique of the depraved state of arts. There were strenuous efforts on the part of nationalists to hail the performing arts of dance, music and theatre as part of the nation-building process and as an integral symbol of our national culture. Her body was the site of political debate while “she became hostage to shifting definitions of nation.”³⁶

On the eve of independence while women performers were at an intersection point in their lives waiting for the verdict to be passed, Indira Menon’s *Madras Quartet* brings us the history of those women who though intensely rooted in tradition, were yet able to carve out a space for themselves. It is a chronological construction of Carnatic music at one level, and the revolutionary change in the status of women musicians after the 1930s at another. About the women from *Isai Vellalar* caste, they actually were not musicians to begin with but belonged to the devadasi class. Music for them was an escape route to survive against the onslaught of the anti-*nautch* campaign. Initially, female singing was dismissed as ‘low brow’ and incapable of the intricacies of the ragas. In this sense, she traces the socio-historical background that led to the emergence of four major female

³⁵*Ibid.*, p75.

³⁶ Deniz Kandiyoti, in *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, ed. by Hutchinson and Smith, Part IV.

Carnatic vocalists and how the technology of gramophone helped the devadasis³⁷ to come out of hiding and sing on the radio before they began to venture on the public stage. A fairly simple style of narration has been adopted to construct a comprehensive understanding of the lives and outstanding musical attributes of women singers.

This brings us to look at another angle which does not specifically talk about women performers in colonial India, but the changed circumstances of the post independence period and how stereotypes developed in an earlier time, make contemporary discriminations against women seem legitimate.³⁸ Hereby, the study on a woman performer, the known *bharatnatyam* dancer, *Chandralekh: Woman, Dance, Resistance (1995)* by Rustom Bharucha has come to attract special attention.

It is a biographical account by Bharucha on the contemporary Indian classical dancer Chandralekha who is largely seen by the dance world as standing opposite to the rest of the dance fraternity. She has taken up the art form to a level, an effort that has been appreciated by some, while others have outrightly rejected her methodology. In this sense the book is a well-written narrative about her desire to live life, her constant struggle to achieve a sense of freedom from the defined norms of both the dance world as well as the society.

After completing her training in the traditional repertoire at Kalakshetra she began to question the tradition as it was formerly instituted. She rejected the *guru-shishya parampara*, she refused to recognize the authority of a *guru* (teacher), and she rejected the sublimated *brahmanical* context of post-*natyashastra* dance and

³⁷ Devadasis were temple dancers who performed the traditional dance form Sadir and acquired proficient skills in both music and dance and these living repositories were an integral part of the Indian culture and what they represented was the accumulated knowledge of generations. However, these women were pushed to a position by the society that saw them as mere medium of entertainment and sensual pleasure of a patriarchal society. (See, Srinivasan, 1985; Kersenboom, 1990; Sarkar, 2005; Gaston, 1995; Marglin, 1985).

³⁸ Hannah, 1988, p10.

subsequently gave up dance in 1972. Instead, she got passionately involved in the women's and human rights movements and engaged herself in other creative activities such as writing, designing and other multi-media projects simultaneously. In 1984 with the east-west dance encounter in Bombay she returned to her true calling, reinterpreting the classical tradition for which she won international accolades though remaining controversial at home. The first step that she took in this direction was to combine the various dance forms by fusing the basic techniques of *bharatanatyam* with those of *yoga* and techniques of martial arts. Moreover, through her style, she sought to put forward her feminist viewpoints, addressing issues that affected women in the new millennium and towards their empowerment. It was the boldness of her vision that attracted loads of criticism from different corners of the dance world, so much so that she has been called the 'rebel' dancer.

Having said that, Bharucha's interpretation reflects a very sympathetic attitude towards Chandralekha's work and her personality on a whole. The narrative seems to pay homage to this great master and glorifies Chandralekha, which tends to erase some of the controversies that surround her. It celebrates her radical individualism and her choices against various forms of domination. Writing a biography may be the most difficult type of history for anyone to attempt because any sympathy or identification with the subject involves danger of a great degree of distortion and bias. Keeping the necessary caution in mind, this particular biographical account of Chandralekha as a performer also highlights the fact that as she deviates from traditional practice, she is perceived on the edges of the cultural context in which she is working. She may not be called marginal in the sense of being a complete outcast as the women performers in colonial period were, since she has carved out a niche for herself successfully and is a renowned name in artistic circles. Yet, because of lack of funding and no state support at all, she is far from being the part of the 'mainstream'. At some level she is no different from the early woman performer for there is something expected from

her and she transgresses those boundaries. Her style is seen as “manipulation of movements that are part of the embodied ‘traditions’ in its cultural context.”³⁹

One may criticize her work but her choreographies and many like her have been able to push the boundaries of dance performance, that is, what does it mean to make dances with “deep political engagements.” As Ananya Chatterjee writes, her work is “valuable as cultural political articulations.” Rather than outrightly rejecting such artists, Chatterjee urges that there is a need to debate their work as the work of talented individuals who have been influenced by and draw on their cultural legacies and traditions.

One also needs to understand that it is the legacies of past that affect the issues of representation today. In the context of the colonization of India and the subsequent movement for independence, “issues of gender and sexuality were wrapped up in several layers of silencing.”⁴⁰ And in this politics marking the socio-cultural arena of the period, female body often became the site upon which these contestations were laid out. At the same time, it reflects the shifting definitions and transition in the way the new woman performer- one who is empowered, creative, and passionate about her art, is still negotiating a space for herself- may be perceived.

The Parallel Picture:

A comparative perspective helps us gain a sense of similar movements across cultures while retaining a sense of the uniqueness of our own culture. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to draw parallels with the women performers of the Parisian theatre and the actresses of the Victorian period, who also suffered the same stigma and were despised and damned for their chosen profession. For centuries, the position of women within the theatre has been fraught with innuendo because of men’s persistent tendency to equate actresses with

³⁹ Ananya Chatterjee, *Butting Out, Reading Resistive Choreography through works by Jawole Willa Jo Zoller and Chandralekha*, Wesleyan, 2004, p.21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p11.

prostitutes. In case of the English stage women, though allowed to perform only minor roles, were excluded from the more influential jobs related to the organization and the administration of the dramas.

English theatre of the 16th and 17th centuries has been viewed by scholars as monolithically patriarchal drama and theatre, a culture increasingly repressive of women's rights and freedom. It was in 1662, that Charles I sanctioned the appearance of actresses, however, their working conditions were dreadful. Early 19th century saw visitors and newspapers referring to them as 'repulsive beings' and the theatres as 'great public brothels'. In this sense, Tracy C. Davis' *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, notes the social stigma attached to the female performers and it was perpetuated by the context of their being presented on the stage and subjected to the male gaze. The neighborhoods of playhouses, costuming, and customary gestural language of the non-legitimate stage perpetuated and reinforced the traditional view of actresses.⁴¹ Their condition was particularly miserable and the low wages and uncertainty of employment only furthered the popular beliefs about their character. What is interesting is that the actresses never made any distinction between their private and public lives. The two were inseparable. However, given the overarching dominant ideologies of the time, the separation was made whereby the public was seen as immoral and the private as sacred. Nevertheless, both the spheres whether private or public, were highly controlled and regulated by the patriarchal society of the time. The latter half, however, saw a number of legal changes being introduced which showed some consideration to the problems faced by women, in particular, the violence of men against wives. A number of acts in this regard were passed. For instance, in 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act was passed making divorce more freely available. Similarly, the Married Women's Property Act (1870), allowed women to retain ownership of their property while they lived with their husband. On the other hand, in the case of women performers, a major assault on the male dominated stage came from an organization called the

⁴¹ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, Routledge, 1991, p6.

Actresses Franchise League (AFL) in 1908 encouraging new talent and writing (by women).⁴²

What makes the book an interesting reading is her choice of applying different methodologies to different chapters and not following one narrative model. As opposed to most of the works, which use autobiographies, memoirs, personal letters, official papers, to construct a narrative devoted to successful stars of the period and the great figures who dominated the Parisian stage, as in the case of Lenard R. Berlanstein's *Daughters of Eve*, Davis uses census returns, wage statistics, theatrical accounts, press writings and some autobiographical accounts of "unnotable" women performers such as ballet girls, acrobats, trapeze artists, extras, all clubbed under the category of actresses. She studies the Victorian actress as an everyday working woman who is confronted with the necessity to earn a living within the gender constraints of the times and it was the dire circumstances of the period that forced these actresses to depend on prostitution. The image they came to acquire was imposed on them by the cultural ideologies of the time. From a descriptive account of the theatre organization to the historical demography of the profession to a reading of the economic circumstances and the social consequences for women taking up this profession, the basic framework discusses how these stigmatized actresses fit into the theatrical conventions of the Victorian period which is marked by rigid gender restrictions largely experienced by the actresses as compared to their male counterparts.

Lenard R. Berlanstein's *Daughters of Eve* on the other hand is, just like other texts, a cultural construction of actresses- the most famous and fascinating women in French history- as a distinct category or sub-group of French society. The study is significant in the sense that it does not discuss how they lived or what they earned, which however is the centre of discussion in Davis's account. Neither does it talk about any aspects of performance. It rather looks at an interesting dimension about how various political regimes of the French society determined

⁴²Andrew Davies. *Other Theatres*, chp.5

the status of women performers and accordingly incorporated these transgressive women into their respective cultures. Thus, what one encounters here is not a simple history that easily rejects the Parisian actresses as ‘dangerous’ and ‘immoral’ creatures who fraught the French society. One needs to address at the same time the important historical issue that these actresses, who were accused of threatening the morals of society, were shaped by the political climate and the subsequent ruling ideology. Every time a new political regime came to power; it was accompanied by an ideology that suited its purpose well and further defined the social attitudes towards these actresses and the role they played in the public imagination of what was largely an elite culture. Moreover, what was defined may be damned in one era but may be accepted in another. If anything went wrong with the working of the society, it was the actresses who were blamed for its malfunctioning but if everything functioned well, it was the same actresses who were granted with the tag of a celebrity and were put on a pedestal of sophistication. For instance, between the 17th century and the First World War, the representation of French theatre women treats them as “barometers of acceptance of women in public sphere.”⁴³

It is in this sense that Berlanstein uses social constructionist explanations in order to understand the definitions of French actresses who were largely imagined as objects of desire and lust by the dominant male subject. An important dimension of Berlanstein’s model is that the actresses are not only judged by the standards of an ideal woman, particularly the character of her domesticity. Instead, the perceptions about these actresses were largely a result of changes taking place in the political realm. As a result, soon the discourse of the moralized actress made her an acceptable model for married woman, something one can never imagine in pre-independent India.

If one draws parallels with the Indian case, one does see, as mentioned above, the same deplorable & despised position held by the female actresses, but

⁴³Berlanstein. 2001, p.240.

unfortunately one does not see any attempt to form a separate organization or a platform that could cater to their problems or look into their miserable conditions. Even the IPTA remained to an extent pretty lightly controlled movement, though middle-class women do come out in the open and share a (minimal) degree of equality and space, which was until now unfamiliar to them.

Conclusion:

Summing up the discussion, it would suffice to say, in the context of colonial period, that the public nature of their profession and the absolute necessity of putting oneself up for general security led to mental association between them and prostitutes. Their every action was always necessarily seen by society as subversion of tradition, rather than try and understand why they behaved the way they did. What is their experience at that moment? The texts analyzed, though discuss women performers belonging to different performance traditions set in diverse geographical location and situated in specific historical time and further use different approaches to construct a narrative structure surrounding the voice and history of the woman performer, only make the subject more interdisciplinary and the dialogue more intensified. Finally, although the dissertation is not primarily based on a study of women performers, nonetheless the above discussion seems essential to further lay down the platform for what is to succeed in the following pages.

Chapter Two

Women Created by Women

Self-sacrificing, enduring, unshaken virtue, steadfast, nurturing, giving and preserving are a few examples of many such adjectives that have for long defined the embodiment of an ideal Indian womanhood often discovered in narratives by male playwrights and directors. The chapter here attempts to pursue the study of women characters that have come to occupy centre stage in works by their female counterparts in theatre and at the same time learn whether these stereotypes continue to figure in their representations as well or do we see necessary points of departure.

In the context of analyzing works by women, the study shifts focus from women performers onstage to women practitioners behind the scenes. By women practitioners I mean women playwrights and directors. Playwriting and direction, both the jobs have been a male prerogative in theatre for as far as one can think. However, with the Indian People's Theatre Association on the verge of becoming an organized movement, a distinct and a radical trend in theatre emerged in the 1940s.

Women and Indian People's Theatre Association:

When one talks of IPTA, the first thing that comes to mind is its significance for being able to "base its programme for a cultural awakening of the masses of India on a revitalization of the country's traditional arts and rich cultural heritage."⁴⁴ Also "IPTA's traditionalism was the first major modern reaction against two deeply entrenched colonial practices: a century long denigration of indigenous forms by the colonial and Indian urban elite, and the thorough commercialization of the proscenium stage by the bourgeois entrepreneurs."⁴⁵ In this sense, "IPTA was the answer for the survival of what was known as the 'oppressed folk'." But

⁴⁴ Aparna Dharwadkar, "Alternative Stages: Anti-Realism. Gender and Contemporary Indian 'Folk' Theatre". *Sangeet Natak*, Volume xxxix, No3, 2005. p10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p10.

more importantly, the significance of IPTA and other parallel theatre movements in the form of 'Voicing Silence' in the early '90s, as a unique effort at gendered theatre could not be overlooked. The objective has been to give voice to the voiceless and use theatre as a critical tool for the expression of women's voice via developing and performing plays on women's issues and related themes.

For the first time middle-class women came to be associated with theatre. Urban middle classes were moving into spaces that had been completely unfamiliar to women of their class. Though the process was slow, it was now possible for women from the so called respectable classes to appear on public stage. Thus, being committed to people's theatre had meant breaking a certain boundary of patriarchal authoritarianism, a refusal to model themselves in roles prescribed for women by patriarchy. Despite these changes taking place, there were very few women who would take up this profession while others distanced themselves due to largely societal and moral reasons.

At the same time, a new category of women practitioners, if we can call them, was carving a space for itself in the arena of theatre and undertaking artistic control which still remained in the hands of men by and large. What I mean by the women practitioners hereby are the invisible voices of women playwrights who have not been heard till the middle of the 20th century. Though women have been performers, writing plays was not a genre that they ventured into until late 1940s and more appropriately in the post-independence period. It has been argued that women have been closely and continuously associated with traditional theatrical and dramatic performances wherein ritual performance was an integral aspect of the collective experience of the community and whereby women also wrote performance scripts. Tuntun Mukherjee points out that if a difference is made between the traditional performances and company theatre that developed under the influence of colonialism, then indeed women are found to be largely absent

from the documented history of modern Indian theatre as a cultural process and drama as a literary genre.⁴⁶

In this sense, it is these women dramatists who form the subject of the chapter. They, in their own time and space, have produced some of the much acclaimed work and have managed to say what they wanted to and yet their contributions have been largely ignored or their history circumscribed. Beginning with 1940s and 1950s some noteworthy attempts have been made in this direction by few but important women playwrights and directors like Vijay Mehta, Dina Pathak, Shiela Bhatia, Usha Ganguly and many others, though they had to operate largely within the parameters and the accepted language of the theatre. The 80s and the 90s witnessed more independent work amongst women practitioners delving right into the issues that concern them as a woman and a woman in general. Most of these women associated with the National School of Drama, have been working in an atmosphere made up of many strands creating their own idioms.⁴⁷ There is, it seems, a strong sense among them to search for alternate ways of creating texts and scripts that would further their concerns more appropriately. At the same time the question one needs to ask here is to what extent are there clear departures from the accepted mode of theatrical language as argued? The answer to this would be largely based on interviews with women in theatre itself since published academic studies are rare apart from the often minimal work that is limited to magazines and selected journals.

At this point, it would be interesting to look at some of the issues that have come to light in the process of uncovering the history of women playwrights. Modern

⁴⁶ Tuntun Mukherjee, *Staging Resistance, Plays by Women in Translation*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.7

⁴⁷ Vasudha Dalmia in her work *Poetics, Plays and Performance* talks about Kirti Jain, working in the liberal tradition spawned by IPTA; Maya Rao, a trained Kathakali performer, uses this dance to create modernist performances; Anamika Haksar explores 'the overlapping selves of wife and courtesan, ascetic and madman'; Tripurari Sharma chose to work with marginalizes groups, peasants, women and children; Their work Dalmia argues "slits open the certainties of gender roles, dissolves boundaries between the public and private. The old definitions of character no longer hold." p317.

Indian drama has been largely identified with the works of playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and others who have set the trend for writers in other areas and rise in dramatic activity which has cross-cultural manifestations. It is not to undermine their significance, bold innovations, and fruitful experiments in contemporary Indian theatre which goes in the history of Indian drama as an important mark of achievement.

This leads us to question the dearth of women playwrights in relation to the bustling population of their male counterparts. The answer to this has been that “women playwrights write about strong feminine concerns or simply write about women for no political reasons. However, theatre companies by and large prefer to do plays with a male protagonist and therefore less female representation amongst visible playwrights.”⁴⁸ This brings us to the debate on the difference between ‘feminist theatre’ and ‘women’s theatre’.

There is a diversity of opinions about the relationship between ‘feminism’ and women’s work in theatre. Lizabeth Goodman points out in the case of her study on feminist theatres that terms such as ‘women’s theatre’ and ‘feminist theatre’ are defined in relation to dominant assumptions about ‘what theatre is’. She adds that feminist theatre is defined as ‘alternative’ because it is created by women in the context of patriarchal culture and therefore created in a particular context. As quoted at length:

“‘Feminist theatre’ logically bases itself on the established concerns of the organized Women’s Movement, on the seven demands: equal pay; equal education and job opportunities; free 24-hour nurseries; free contraception and abortion on demand; financial and legal independence; freedom from violence and sexual coercion. The tendency therefore is not so much towards

⁴⁸ Lakshmi Subramaniam, “A Dialogue with Mahesh Dattani”, in *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* Ed. by Lakshmi Subramaniam, January 2002, p.128.

a revaluation of the role of women within society as we know it, but towards the creation of a totally new set of social structures in which the traditional male-female roles will be redefined. Feminist theatre thus defined may include all the different schools of feminist thought and practice. It allows for a cultural emphasis on 'women's experience', yet it acknowledges that some feminists reject this idea as potentially reductive or essentialist.⁴⁹ But it remains the case that not all the women involved in the creation, production of feminist theatre would recognize themselves as feminist. Attaching the feminist label to women's work in the theatre is complicated, due not only to the shifting definitions of the term, but also to the shifting priorities and concerns of the individual practitioners at different stages of their lives."⁵⁰

Thus what Goodman proposes is a flexible definition that can be employed in a study of work of 'women's theatre'.

In other words, if to be feminist means to look at things from only a female perspective, this idea then presents itself to be problematic. Neelam Mansingh opines that "Being a woman, it is easy for me to understand the woman's mind, their passions and problems. I cannot negate my gender....Women are my protagonists not just because they are women, but essentially because they are human beings."⁵¹ Therefore, every presentation of women need not be associated with the feminist discourse though critical or gender studies and ideas flashed by feminism have had some influence. At the same time one may keep in mind the fact that woman's question has been implicated in a different context in India. Issues taken up and articulated do not have only political connotations but are

⁴⁹ Lizabeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*, Rutledge, 1993, p.37.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.

⁵¹ Chaman Ahuja, "Theatrical Phulkari" in *Theatre India*, No4, November 2001, p.45.

dealt with in a rather wider context. For instance, the works that are intended to be discussed here will be contextualized within broad parameters ranging from those written in the pre-independence period to the post-colonial experience.

Another issue that may be pointed out is that “gender threatens to become the exclusive term of analysis and we lose sight of its intersections with the ways other social and political factors situate the writers in question, thus risking repeating the marginalization of women writers.”⁵² In this context, one is not trying to only look at the plays written by women from the perspective of their being only women, which, but of course, cannot be negated. Therefore, “writing is not gender-neutral; rather it is a medium through which imaginative self-translation across gendered boundaries become possible.”⁵³

Literature:

Having said that, let us have a brief account of other works in this field. Of the existing body of literature on the subject by far the most comprehensive contributions in this direction are by Lakshmi Subramaniam in her edited work *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* which highlights many of the issues that have been discussed above. It is basically a collection of essays which cover a wide range of playwrights, both men and women, with the focus on the voice of women playwrights in modern Indian theatre arguing how their voices are ‘muffled’. The essays mostly in the form of interviews try and discuss women practitioners’ experiences and the issues that concern them collectively and individually, which at most levels, are different from their male counterparts, especially in gender related themes. It is quite surprising when noted playwrights like G.P.Deshpande comment that “there are no women dramatists of significance...In short they have drawn a blank.” On the contrary, there are women practitioners who have expressed no qualms about what they wanted to articulate. Though most of their plays are either an adaptation or reconstruction of

⁵² Marcie Frank, *Gender, Theatre and the Origins of Criticism*, California University Press, 2003, p.100.

⁵³ *Ibid.*,p.100.

the available texts, there are others who tend to work in close collaboration with other writers to create texts and further weave into them their own personal experiences. Just to take a case in point hereby I would like to mention the essay *In Their Own Voice*, Lakshmi Subramaniam in conversation with Anuradha Kapur, Geetanjali Shree and Vidya Rao. While the first two are active theatre practitioners, Vidya Rao is a renowned thumri singer for whom venturing into theatre was a completely different experience and at the same time their work *Umrao* is an example of how women practitioners particularly have been trying to work around various issues that concern them. It is an example of what is known as a collaborative effort and their ability to use their creative idiom and explore the space that has been created for them and expand that space as and when required to suit their perceptions. The character of Umrao, as we would all know, has been popularly linked with first the novel *Umrao Jan Ada*, an Urdu novel, by Mohammed Hadi Ruswa, and later made into a popular Bollywood film with Rekha enacting the popular courtesan Umrao Jan. It has been perhaps the most researched about and worked upon character. However the purpose here to direct another *Umrao* was not, it seems, to present another version but to look at it in a wider perspective. What makes the production an interesting subject is primarily for the reason that for the first time the character has been read into from a woman's perspective since it was both adapted and directed by Geetanjali Shree and Anuradha Kapur respectively. In the initial endeavors, it has been argued, that the courtesan narrative has been constructed by the male gaze. But Geetanjali Shree urges the attempt, at this time, was to undo the image that has had been created again and again and try and portray the kind of woman that was behind that image. She adds "We were interested in the courtesan as a woman, and wanted to know more about women's lives, where are women's lives available? We felt the need to go to the more public woman, the performer, and the courtesan."⁵⁴ Quoting at large from the conversation to show what was there and how was it transfigured.

⁵⁴ Lakshmi Subramaniam, "In Their Own Voices: Anuradha Kapur, Geetanjali Shree and Vidya Rao in conversation with Lakshmi Subramaniam", in Lakshmi Subramaniam ed.,

Anuradha K.: Umrao is shown as failing, lonely, and appallingly afraid of old age. For us the play Umrao was the deconstruction of a narrative not of the archetypal perfect performer.

Geetanjali S.: The novel ends with a major speech by Umrao that she is old. She warns other women not to follow her fallen path for though she had great moments in her life and extracted more from it, she is now old and abandoned and has nobody to love so she advises other women to be honorable. In our production, Umrao talks about the positive and negative things in her life and defines herself as an intelligent woman and not a 'rundi' (prostitute). For the male writer her life is over, but the woman writer looks at her and asks "what else?" Umrao utters a great line, "lekin ab to hum karwat badalte hai". For Umrao, life is not over."⁵⁵

These statements clearly show the concern of women practitioners in a certain kind of presentation of women. Their reflectiveness about women is the opposite of the marginalization of most female characters in plays by male playwrights where women are marginalized in a society, where gender politics and male structures prevail as the order of the day. This is not to imply that all male playwrights lack that level of consciousness or have been deliberately trying to narrow down possibilities for their female characters to explore. Perhaps, one might argue that both see her (the female character) from various perspectives and interpret her from their viewpoint of a woman. There are many male playwrights who place women characters at the core of the plays.

For instance, Gursharan Singh, a noted Punjabi playwright, in one of his interviews points out that so much is wrong with the society and it's the woman

Muffled Voices. January 2002. p.233.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 234-235.

who bears the brunt of it. In order to disseminate the message of the need to empower women he has come to adopt a very different medium to create his play and present it to the people in a way that it would benefit them in the best possible way. As a result what came into being was called *Lok Natak* or the Community Theatre related to some event or contemporary theme that affected the people directly. What was interesting in his approach was his ability to create something on the spot without paper or pen or a readily available text. The idea is to take a theme and build up performance around it. Clearly, opposed to the convention, the stress has not been on the stage, the massive sets, costumes or expensive props. He feels that more than these it's the performance that should matter and he rehearsed most of his plays while traveling to the place where they were supposed to perform. The general idea was to communicate with the people via the form of the theatre, as much as possible. What is even more thought provoking is the idea to communicate with the people in the villages, to tell them about life- how it changes and how it can change for the better.

During the interview he came to prepare a play called *Samaj* or 'Society' that intends to push forward issues concerning women in society, where women constitute half of the population. He very randomly (though in a linear fashion) tries to raise central issues through his female protagonists. Very briefly the actors argue that "women give birth but we, the society, identify a particular child by the name of his father. But when it comes to changing diapers it is the primary responsibility of women who are slaves of the family of the society." In one of the scenes two sisters, 17 and 19 years old, committed suicide due to some family conflict. They stand up and question the people who make this society wherein the women folk are vulnerable creatures who are tortured and have to bear the burden of social conventions. In the end they ask the question "Bai aidi aurat di kyon bekadri hoi?" (Why a woman is insulted in such a manner?) "She is running away from the mother-in-law, the husband, the brother-in-law....she is burning." It seems the target audience is the village woman.

However, the point one is trying to make is that being a male playwright, he can generate that sensitivity in his plays related to women and their upliftment and unmask social and cultural prejudices embedded in a dominant patriarchal society. While this may appear to be a very linear narrative, especially in terms of the issues, we also need to perhaps take into account who is the target audience and which is the medium that would probably portray the best picture and drive forth the message to be conveyed.

Another aspect which highlights this new expression of freedom is the study of play scripts written primarily by women which though have striking commonalities in terms of the selection of themes- strongly centered around women's lives and yet worked out in a variety of styles by their respective authors. Tuntun Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance* forms an integral part of this research since her work is an anthology of plays translated from their regional languages. Each play, in its own way, engages with social issues from a woman's perspective. The anthology dramatizes women's resistance to social pressures which push them to circumscribe their spheres of activity, as well as makes explicit the various kinds of oppression and violence that form a part of their daily lives. The plays constitute a significant intervention of gender in the discourse of Indian theatre.

Grouped with these, may follow another interesting (but surprisingly the only) article that I have come across related to women in Punjabi theatre (which happens to be the focus of my study as well). More than often the Bengali and Marathi theatres have been the target of academic research while other theatrical spaces manage to survive on the periphery. By other theatrical spaces I mean the category of 'regional theatre' which is largely used for theatres of north India, south India, and others. One may argue that this could be largely a result of the fact that even much before independence the cities of Calcutta and Bombay were the centre of political activity and therefore the dramatic activity eventually came to be concentrated there. But at the same time this also tends to give more

leverage to the work that has been happening in the mainstream and in turn marginalizing the importance of the so-called 'regional' theatres. In this sense, Punjab falls under the latter category. Speaking in the context of Punjab, if we take a serious look, it would appear that women were conspicuous by their absence not only on the Punjabi stage in particular but also by their absence from theatre writing and management until the late 1940s in general. Chaman Ahuja's article '*Theatrical Phulkari*' in this sense is a valuable work for it is the only piece that throws some light on the status of women playwrights in Punjab. The article discusses mostly the sketches of the 'sisters in arms' in the field of theatre: Shiela Bhatia, Rani Balbir Kaur, and Neelam Mansingh Chaudhary. Though they are representatives of their own generations, all of them are, in the broadest possible terms, exponents of theatrical realism and above all the speakers for an essentially Punjabi culture. Their plays reflect not only upon them as being women of courage and determination but the same goes for the women characters they portray.

It is in light of the already existing work that I would like to present this respective chapter. The focus as I mentioned above would be on a study of plays by women, in theatre. In the context of modern Indian theatre marked by cross-cultural manifestations, the location of women playwrights is complex and demands a flexible approach. A greater problem is access to material or productions which are not always published in or translated into English. Thus, the material that is available may be combined with the methodology of interviews to discuss their experiences. Speaking in the context of Punjab, it is indeed important to understand the social and cultural aspects of the Punjabi society and its relation with women folk.⁵⁶ To what extent were the new dimensions, those that were beginning to be introduced in the early part of the theatre movement in the already existing structures of class relationship and gender relationship, able to alter or transform those gender boundaries? For the

⁵⁶ Refer to chapter one of the dissertation that talks about reform movement in Punjab and 'woman's question'.

purpose of this chapter I intend to restrict myself to the study of the plays by women across the region. Above questions shall be discussed separately in the following chapters.

Different Strokes, Striking Parallels:

A view commonly held by theatre practitioners in India and around is that the way women envision things may be quite different from how men perceive and manifest issues largely because of the 'gendered way of seeing'. But it is also true and often agreed upon that what a particular woman visualizes will differ in intriguing ways from what a woman next to her sees.

The second section, in this sense, would like to have an understanding of the plays written by women playwrights and the kind of issues the texts throw up? What kind of stories do women tell through their characters and the narratives that they weave around it?

In the following pages the attempt would be to study five plays written by women playwrights across regions perhaps to underline the fact that there are able and creative women writers, though few, who have through their plays and stylistic embellishments tried to put forth a voice that hitherto was hidden or remained suppressed. What these plays may signify is the very theme of disclosure where women are presented through various forms of discourses. What comes forth in most of the plays is a narrative of changing times, changing manners and customs, and changing values.

Having said that, I would like to begin with the study of the plays which proposes to reflect upon a rich and abundant characterization of its women protagonists. It so happens that plays may be divided into categories for a better understanding of the women characters and particularly their authors. The first category includes two plays, 'The Wedding Triangle' written in pre-independence period, and 'Prey' written on the verge of independence. The second category constitutes two

plays written and performed in the 90s. Though one may find a vast gap in the two time periods and in terms of different concerns and sensibilities, but the commonality occurs in choosing issues related to women as their central theme, and women as the central protagonist with a desire to change. Moreover, the styles in which these plays may have been visualized might be different but the selection of themes often centered on women's lives, to narratives that allow open ended exploration, from breaking stereotypes of characters to exploration of their inner world, and finally emphasizing on the process rather than the end product. Gender has come to provide a more conscious term for searching out alternative terms of self-location in their artistic milieu.⁵⁷

Some works may seem one-dimensional and linear in terms of their format but the underlying idea has been to overcome the embedded edifice of the glorified, sacrificial and static images and replace them with issues of real life struggles and experiences based on day to day life. To what extent these works may be seen as forming an alternative genre is not known. Perhaps what needs to be taken into account is their significance as plays by women constituting critical cultural history. This brings us to putting complete focus on understanding the content of the plays.

Prey:

To begin with, 'Prey' or *Paradh* in Marathi was staged for the first time in 1947. The play is written by Malatibai Bedekar, a well known creative writer. Focusing on the way the play has conceptualized, interestingly not a single male character finds space in the play barring a few passing mentions of the two male characters whose prominence is not visible in the text. Written in a conventional style, the play focuses on the victimization of women and shows the plight of an uneducated woman deserted by her husband and exploited by society. Clearly, the play written and performed in the 1940s tends to focus on the issues of the time that concerned women and that posed a hindrance to their development.

⁵⁷ Lata Singh, 2005, p. 312.

It is a story about a destitute illiterate woman known as Rama who does chores of cooking and cleaning in other people's houses after being thrown out of her own house by her mother-in-law who accuses her of being inauspicious. She is forced to live with her mother and in order to feed herself and her child she finds work as a domestic servant which she is quite ashamed of. It is interesting that she sees her not being educated and independent as having led her into this situation. In one of the conversations with her mother she says:

“Rama: Today, women of my age are either happily married or are working at good jobs. When I insisted that I should study more, you pushed me into marriage and look at my condition. Now you are compelling my sisters to marry too.

Mother: What else can we do? When we can't even feed ourselves, how can we think of educating the girls? And educate six of you? Where's the money, to spend first on education and then on marriage?

Rama: Don't you know what can happen if you don't educate the girls? Your eldest daughter is a widow and fends for herself by cooking for others. You got me married and look at my condition. If you get other two to marry, they might face similar problems. Will the men who pay you to marry your daughters care for their wives?

Mother: Do you expect us to look after you forever? How do we get the money for dowry to marry you?

Rama: Wouldn't you have tried to do better if you had sons? Wouldn't you have made an effort to give your son an education?

Mother: Oh, sons are different from daughters. Daughters are like swords out of scabbards...What's the point in educating girls only to marry them off?

Rama: What you say is the way the world thinks. You won't educate girls because they go away to another house. But do they know whether that house will be their home or not?

Mother: That is destiny. Some fall on the garbage heap, some sit on the throne.

Rama: Oh this is good! How many women are destroyed because of this attitude, has anybody ever thought of that?"⁵⁸

Clearly, Rama and many women like her are seen as a liability by parents and marriage over education seems to many as a decent and the only viable option.

Another interesting and equally surprising fact that comes forth through the play is that the women are one of the major obstacles in the path of their own development, or development of their fellow sisters. Ketaki, a housewife, after hearing about Rama's story, she insists that Rama bai must stay with her and work for her full time. Speaking to a social worker called Janki who is also worried about Rama's situation Ketaki says:

"Ketaki: Janki bai, you can worry about those problems later. First you get Rama to stay with me and work full time. I shall pay her Rs. 30.

⁵⁸ *Prey* (Staging Resistance, OUP, 2005), translation from the Marathi original by Shobha Deshmukh, p. 269.

Janki: (Irritated) Don't you want her to return to her own home? Would you rather that a woman from a good family spends her life as a cook in others' homes?...I am thinking of taking Rama to an institute. Her child is not able to be with her all the time due to her work and she suffers a lot. She could get some education too.

Ketaki: Please don't put the thought of education into her head. What will she learn at her age? And what does she need it for?

Janki: What do you mean? Just because you need a servant, you want to keep her away from other opportunities, is it? Destitute women in her condition are better placed in charitable institutes than as servants.”⁵⁹

Moreover, being in such a situation, gives other people a chance to use her as a scapegoat to further their motives. Following Ketaki, her mother-in-law tired of Ketaki's indulging in luxuries and leisurely behavior forces her to use Rama as bait to teach Ketaki a lesson. She accuses Rama of stealing Ketaki's jewellery and encouraging romantic liaisons with her husband which pushes Rama to the edge of her patience and resilience. Responding to the baseless allegations she angrily points out, “I am younger in age and experience than that old lady. Instead of protecting me, this is how she went about destroying me. At least, for her son's sake, she should have been careful before playing such sly games.”... First sympathy and then such deceiving games, she goes on to say “Those accused of sinning often repeat their mistakes because they find no one willing to listen to them.”

It is equally interesting that the play does not only mention the problem but also voices concern and solution for a problem like this. One also notices in the play that not only Rama is aware of the oppression incurred upon her and many like

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

her but that this awareness of women's oppression in society is voiced through the character of Janki, an enthusiastic social worker as mentioned above. In one of her conversations with Ketaki and her friend Sunanda, she argues for the need to improve the condition of these *anath* women abandoned by their husbands and their families alike. Advocating for divorce she argues that, "The Act banning many marriages must include the divorce in case of incompatibility. However, before I take up the divorce issue, I must concentrate on consolidating the training institute for women. These unfortunate women must be trained to earn their own livelihood." Another of Janki's activist friends urges,

"Kala: We just don't need an anath ashram....A kind of satayagrah is needed. The law does not permit the deserted wives to remarry."

Janki: That's good. I am waiting for more women to come forward and take initiative with various programmes for women's upliftment. With such satyagrah, public awareness will grow. Only then can social change take place."⁶⁰

Thus, one sees a strong urgency among the able women of the society to encourage a movement demanding remarriage of these deserted women to further enable a fresh start in life. However, this step does evoke an opposite reaction surprisingly not from the men folk but the women themselves. Women like Ketaki, Mathura, Rama's mother-in-law, and others stand against the procession, suggested to be carried out by the women activists, demanding alimony given to such women. A sort of public forum is in the making for people to debate and discuss the problems. Rama is also invited to join the procession but having suffered to the hilt she feels there is no point in participating. She argues, "Why should I have faith in you? Are you really doing all this to help women like us? This is an advertisement to show how good you are. If you really want to help me,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

then tell your friend who has tarnished my reputation to clear my name.”.....
“You and I are different people living in separate worlds. Let me tell you that this procession of yours will harm rather than help unfortunate women like me. People will ridicule the deserted women openly.”...Moreover, “I am more worried about earning my bread and butter. I have no time dancing for a second husband.” What appears to be is a dialogic encounter between the elite vanguard which is concerned with the women’s movement and the subaltern “true” Indian woman.

Lost in the debates around her and seeing no solution to her problems and her failing struggle to live a respectable life, Rama finds no way out and agrees to live as a mistress. She is forced to take a step which she until now had been avoiding. Her situation and the dire circumstances surrounding her push her to choose this tortuous path. Lack of education, poverty and the indifference of society trap her and she becomes the prey of social evils. The play ends with raising questions like “How many more Ramas must die before a change will come? Hasn’t time come to save them?” rather than providing any solutions paving way for open ended judgments.

One of the significant aspects of the play is that it is a multi layered narrative for not a single but multiple issues which surface throughout. One is the issue of rehabilitating destitute women, educating them and enabling them to make sense of their complex lives. Another is Ketaki’s turbulent relationship with her own mother-in-law. In one of the scenes the latter asks her granddaughter to demonstrate her dance. But after learning that Ketaki also likes to dance she comments, “This is not good. One day you might push your daughters into cinema and follow yourself.....Good entertainment for people.” This raises the issue of dance being looked down upon as not respectable among the so-called respectable families.

Having said that, the play throws up several valuable issues that concern the author and she has created her characters in order to voice those concerns in a

well-woven narrative. The characters might seem stereotypical in nature given the time period but a statement nevertheless is made through them and about them.

The Wedding Triangle:

The next play, which also falls within the first category, was written and performed around 1904 by Swarnakumari Devi who among all the playwrights is perhaps the closest to the cultural upheavals of the pre-independence era; especially being the elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore. Indeed she is among the first few women to have written plays at the beginning of 20th century. Also known as *Paak Chakra*, written in Bengali, the play intends to highlight some of the social debates of the time (and like the earlier author) seems to have succeeded in crafting an idiom of difference to debate social evils.

To begin with, the mistress, the lady of the house and her husband, the master are preparing for the marriage of their son. While conversing with one of the household servants Baroda and the matchmaker, the conversation quickly shifts to the need of education for girls. A concern surprisingly voiced by Baroda and not the mistress.

“Baroda:better teach than fix marriages. (To the matchmaker) You must teach my daughter. I want her to get some education....I stayed illiterate all my life. (Very Sweetly) If you teach her, I will pay you five rupees every month.

Mistress: (Interfering) you have gone mad! You will spend five! - rupees for a girls education?”⁶¹

Once again one of the basic issues that have been pointed out in this play is that education is the way forward towards empowering women. Both the characters of

⁶¹ *The Wedding Triangle*, (Staging Resistance. OUP, 2005), translation from the Bengali original by Tuntun Mukherjee, p. 37.

Rama and now Baroda realize that illiteracy is a great hindrance to one's development but in both the cases the ladies of the household feel it is a useless effort and discourage their servants to even think about this matter anymore.

On the other hand while discussing his son's marriage the mistress also stresses the fact that the dowry should not be less than Rs 10,000. At the same time one notes an irony in the situation. The master is the member of a committee that pledges not to demand or offer any dowry, but is forced by his wife to do the opposite. In a state of dilemma he confides in Chandrakanta, a loyal servant, about his problem. He says,

“Master: Listen Chandrakanta, can you think of a way out? I am the president of the Progressive Norms Committee and have signed a declaration that I shall never demand nor offer any dowry. But now...

Chandra: Not the right thing to do...

Master: I know, I know. Well I have committed myself to that foolish oath- how can I conveniently break it for my son's marriage now and demand ten thousand rupees from the bride's father.”⁶²

If this was not enough the mistress under the impression that her son wants to marry Soshi, a widow, whom the mistress had given shelter along with Baroda, ponders over the matter restlessly. Contemplating the situation by herself and then discussing it with her husband she points out,

“Mistress: How could this happen? What shall I do? A widow...that's the problem. Well, things like these are happening everywhere. If there can be widow

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

remarriages among the judges and the magistrates, why should it be faulted if it happens in our family? I don't see anything wrong in that. And where will I find a girl like Soshimukhi anyway? I cannot manage this household without her.

To her husband,

Mistress: Why not? Besides, the oath that you took for the committee that you will not accept any dowry, that will also get honored...the right thing for a president to do.

Master: But she is a widow?

Mistress: Widow remarriages are now permitted by shastras. Big people are getting their widowed daughters married nowadays.

Master: That's for their daughters. No one wants to bring a widow as a daughter-in-law to their homes.

Mistress: There's no more fear of being socially ostracized. When pushed, one can easily move from one room to another! It is possible to have foot each in two boats and sail along, if one has the determination.

Master: See...

Mistress: I can see very clearly. You men pretend to be blind with eyesight and dead while alive, when it comes to dealing with us. Small girls hardly ten or twelve years of age are widowed the day after their wedding, and it becomes a social taboo to even mention their remarriage. But if I die today, then tomorrow...

Master: (puts fingers in his ears) Ram, Ram! How can you say that? I will certainly go for sahamaran and burn in the pyre with you.

Mistress: Don't add insult to the injury. I can't understand why god wants girls to be born into this terrible land. What's our fate?

Master: I touch your feet...will you stop?

Mistress: Why should I stop? The entire set up makes me burn with anger. The male sex that torments us so much will never come to any good.

Master: All right, I'll give you permission. I will write in my will that after my death you can marry again...does that make you happy?

Mistress: You see this as a joke? So you think that once the practice of widow remarriage is generally accepted, all widows will run to get married? Some women would rather remain spinsters than get married even once. But it means that a path is kept open for that eventuality. But keeping them in misery is what your dharma instructs you to do, isn't it? Otherwise, how can your sex be called superior?''⁶³

Now there appears to be an interesting combination of irony and sympathy throughout the narrative. On the one hand she does not want that education be encouraged and goes one step ahead with her constant stress on the fact that dowry be taken from the bride's family. But when it comes to the happiness of her own son and her genuine liking for Soshi she argues the other way round about

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.55-56.

how women are treated and no one has sympathy for these unfortunate beings. Once again though the presentation may seem conventional and the issues repetitive, the focus remains on women's problems and they are the idiom through which it is voiced. What makes the two plays discussed so far unique and innovative is the fact that though they were written in and around the independence period, one does not see a male voice or an image underlining these concerns. Majority of women playwrights in pre-independent period and immediately after independence evinced interest in reform oriented issues. The issues of child marriage, widow remarriage, and their discussion show that women were drawn into the public sphere and were talking on their behalf for their emancipation. The ideals expounded or assumed by them aimed at social regeneration through education. All these were new values and none of them were immune to the change and their plays reflect that. At the same time one also notices that women do not describe the self but the times. But this does not undermine their abilities and creativity. These plays might appear as traditional plot devices with a dependence on dialogic communication but perhaps one also needs to take into account the period they have been written in; that is to say a given historical and geographical moment and the space that was available to their authors to even come up with such coherent structures.

The Swing of Desire:

One of the most fascinating works done in the sphere of Kannada theatre by the noted woman playwright Mamta G. Sagar is her play 'Mayye Bhara Manave Bhara' translated as *The Swing of Desire* drawing upon women's inner experience. As a part of the second category, the play seems to be placed in a more recent period. The plot centers around the lives of two married women. On one hand is Manasa who in her desire to achieve great heights in life through her dance wants to create her individual identity and have a name for herself in the dance world. She wishes to carve out a niche for herself and wants to continue evolving through her art. However there occurs a conflict of opinions between her and her husband Pratap who feels that his wife performing in public is humiliating

and derogatory, especially after their marriage. Moreover, she seems so desperate for her art, he assumes she would stoop to any level and therefore accuses her of infidelity and having an illegitimate child. In Scene I they argue,

“Pratap: When those useless fellows talk about you, about your figure...look Manasa I cant tolerate the idea of your being just a dancer to me, even after our marriage. I loved you and married you hoping you would be a good companion.

Manasa: Oh yes! That’s why you stopped me from dancing and made me a child-bearing machine, an object of your wanton desires, isn’t it?

Pratap: Why say so? Tell me why do you do this? You have staked my honor for a pittance! Go out and ask people, how much respect you command as my wife.

Manasa: That kind of respect I don’t need. I have my identity and self-respect.

Pratap: Your pride as a great dancer? Is that what makes you forget the love starved children of yours, deafening you with the applause? Tell me what kind of a woman are you, what kind of a mother?

Manasa: How dare you use me and exploit my maternal instincts for your selfish motives? ...You are so possessive. (With determination) But my art is more important to me.

Pratap: What about my home? What would people say?

Manasa: Society, people, family...you will make me sacrifice my creativity for your false pride. A woman

glows at her husband's success. She never complains, never envies. Why can't a man accept the fact when his wife goes ahead of him? You can't bear people praising me, can you?Chhi! My body has become rotten these six years as an object of your lust. You have stifled my art. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"⁶⁴

On the other hand, runs a parallel story of Pratap's sister and her husband Bhava. Bhava feels that his wife is too ignorant and that irritates him. He wants his wife to achieve certain high standards and not just act as a domestic servant. He claims,

"Bhava: I appreciate your innocence, but your ignorance irritates me. It's not enough, you see that a woman satisfies one in bed. She should satisfy man's intellectual need as well? You have suppressed yourself so much that I can't see you as my companion at all. Your interests are so limited that I can't communicate with you at all. I am haunted by the feeling that I am using you.

Sister: What more does one want?

Bhava: Yes! Kids, make-up, kitchen, puja, bed, blanket! This is your world. You don't even want anything else. I just can't stand such women.

Sister: Chhi! What kind of a man are you! You can't understand a woman's nature, her feelings, and her sentiments."⁶⁵

Interestingly, on both sides, men have a certain image about an ideal woman, how she should be, how she should behave. One husband wants a loving, caring wife

⁶⁴ *The Swing of Desire*, (Staging Resistance, OUP, 2005), translated by Chaitra Puttaswamy from the Kannada original, p. 233-234.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.239.

whose only concern should be her family whereas the other husband wants his wife to think beyond family, broaden her horizons, be independent and have some ambitions. In both cases the women are not given any choices. Clearly what Manasa feels, is a sentiment that is shared by most of the women who want to strike a balance between their homes and professional lives without giving up either. In Scene III, Manasa recites a poem that signifies what she feels,

Manasa: My dreams, the dreams of my life
Rise from the depth of my being
Oh! My living passion
Come as a beauty, as a gesture
My happy dreams, my colorful dreams
Play to my hearts tune
Come. Come. Come.

At the same time, the sister's sentiments point out that there are women who see the pleasure an Indian woman derives from marital bliss. While some see this as a result of lacking education, the sister feels that if finding pleasure in one's household chores, if keeping one's family happy is called slavery, then so be it. The point perhaps being made is that women should act according to the whims and fancies of men. However, at the end there is a strong emphasis on the need for a woman to have aspirations and the idea of being an individual self is enforced. So much so, that the sister who initially felt a deep concern for her family is made to realize that having dreams and chasing one's dreams is important for a woman to grow. She says, "Manasa you have won. You have proved your worth as a woman, as an individual. But look at me...I lost myself somewhere in the futile attempt to hold on my husband and my family. I have nothing left: no identity, no aspirations, no life, nothing to call mine."⁶⁶

What makes this play different is the shift from stereotypes of characters to exploration of women's inner worlds. What do they aspire and what do they

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

desire? While in the first two plays, the idea behind their conception seemed to be that people need to be disturbed and thus be forced to think about issues surrounding them. In this particular piece, the space may be the same, that is the stage, but the time changes and the space is utilized to suit the times and the themes concerned with it. Women characters herein tend to be already empowered, living in a middle class set up, it seems, and well settled in terms of their respective family lives. They are independent and yet there is a constant effort by their male counterparts to construct them in a fixed image that suits them. It is against this imposition of images upon them that Manasa, and later the sister, tries to run away from and create their own independent separate lives. As a result they organize independently, free from male tutelage. Also the attempt of the author seems to get rid of the image of women in traditional roles, an image thrust upon them, and towards an understanding of a woman who is not just homo eroticus but who is also a doer and a decider.⁶⁷

Medea:

The next play is as diverse and intriguing as it can be. Written by Nabaneeta Dev Sen in 1993, the plot centers around a woman protagonist named Rupsa. An adaptation of Euripides' Greek Tragedy *Medea* first performed in 431 B.C. the play is somehow transported from the world of myth and legend and into a crowded railway station in the suburbs of Delhi. It is interesting how the original name remains and how it is not used in the same sense in this version. This propels one to find out more about the original legend surrounding *Medea*. How different is Medea from Rupsa? However, not going into the details it is the story of a woman in an unusual situation. It is the story of a marriage which went wrong. It is the story of Rupsa and Manas and their small family and how once upon a time they lived a life cherished by both. But things went seriously out of control due to Manas' fraudulent activities and with no other way in sight he decides to leave the country without telling his wife anything about his situation.

⁶⁷ H.S. Shiva Prakash, "Imaging Women in Kannada Theatre", in *Muffled Voices*, ed., by Lakshmi Subramaniam, January 2002, p.60.

It appears that Rupsa, when aware about his coward actions, decides to leave him. After some seven or eight years they both come face to face at a railway station in Delhi but she refuses to recognize him. So much so that she goes on to say that their children are not their own but that they are adopted from the charity run by Mother Teresa.

Reading the narrative is quite engaging for in the beginning it would appear that probably Rupsa had amnesia or something but as one proceeds one realizes how deep her anger was and it was the result of the torment she experienced that she was so bitter towards her husband. Even after countless explanations given by Manas, she believes that there is no way to repair things for they are beyond damage.

“Manas: What are you doing? Why are you letting your anger destroy everything? Rupu, I’ve come back. See, I am here, I am here. (Suddenly falling at her feet and hiding his face in her lap.) Yes, I was wrong. What I did was wrong. But do not be so cruel. Please believe me this time. Don’t people make mistakes? One has to make a choice, but who can guess what might be lost in the process....

Rupsa: (Sorrowfully, placing her hand on his head as in benediction) You are still mistaken. But what does it matter? Don’t people make mistakes? One has to make a choice but who can tell what might be lost in the process? Who can tell the suffering of others? We know so little after all!”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *Medea*, (Staging Resistance, OUP, 2005). translated by Tuntun Mukherjee from the Bengali original, p93-94.

To many probably her decision to leave would seem as extreme and her behavior cruel for how can she talk about her husband being dead when he was right there in front of her and the children being orphans. If not more she could have kept the children with her rather than sending them to a hostel. Clearly the way the Rupsa character has been etched reflects the feminist discourse. To nurture a family is not the sole job of a woman but to be equally shared by both the parents. If it were the woman who had acted in this way and left her family she would have probably been accused of everything. She is not a woman who endures this terrible indignity because that is what is expected of her. Instead we have before us a headstrong character that has made her choice like her husband made one many years ago. This does not make her emotionless for a sense of loss seems to be overwhelming especially the way she talks about the past memories, her marriage, her house, the children; these emotions definitely humanize her, but she refuses to grieve over the loss forever. She is ready to live in exile and proudly scorns any help from Manas and it is her strength portrayed in her decision that evokes a sense of respect for her in the mind of the reader. What comes across is a reflection of the inner emotions of passion, love and vengeance.

Her Mother's Story:

Sushma Deshpande's *Teechya Aichi Goshta* or *Her Mother's Story* has had a successful run for more than a decade. The play, written, directed and performed by Deshpande herself in 1995, fuses her research on *tamasha* performers in Maharashtra into a single character, bringing in the pain, the struggle and above all, the social stigma that attaches to the *tamasha* performers. Since we have discussed above the issue of women performers, this play helps in highlighting the social concern regarding their status.

The *tamasha* performer, named Hira, once seen as synonymous with the woman of questionable character, today after having received accolades and awards for her performances is now seen in a respectable light and everybody wants to interview her. Her daughter Ratna being one of them, the play starts with a

dialogue between the two, slowly followed by a direct monologue of the actress before the audience, a narrative as honest, sincere, and bold as it can be allowing us a peep into the complex world of *tamasha* actresses, their code of conduct, their way of life, which was once perceived as trivial. Clearly, Hira has no regrets. This is a character despite belonging to a low caste and inheriting a profession which is considered disgraceful, she is proud of this inheritance. She might not have encouraged her own daughter to take up this profession but she is nonetheless satisfied with the path she herself chose to go on. As she says: “But I have led my life on my own terms, and with dignity.”⁶⁹

Being very sensitive about her profession and confident of her chosen path she says:

“Dancing is in my blood, I thought. If you put it under microscope, you’d find my blood dancing, not flowing like ordinary blood. When I started walking, my mother put anklets on my feet, so I learned walking to the rhythm of ghungrus.”⁷⁰

An unusual feature about the monologue was her emphasis on the empowering element that *tamasha* bestows on the women artists. Explaining the meaning of empowerment, Deshpande points out that “the *tamasha* woman’s strength lies in her knowledge that she is being exploited. Armed with this knowledge she can use the situation to her advantage and she does so quit ruthlessly. She knows for instance that she must fleece the patron who has fallen for her charms. She is not hampered by sentiments.”⁷¹ For instance, in one of the interviews she is asked that, “Don’t you feel guilty, attracting married men, breaking homes?” To this she replied, “It is our profession to entertain men but we are not prostitutes. We are loyal to the man who is our master till the end.”⁷² One may ask well the question-

⁶⁹ Sushma Deshpande, “Her Mother’s Story”, translated by the playwright, in *The Little Magazine*, vol VII Issue 1& 2, p.133.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p134.

⁷¹ Kinnari Vohra, “Saint, Whore, Witch”, in *Theatre India*, No2., November 2000.

⁷² Deshpandè, p140.

don't these women yearn to have a normal life with a husband and a family? And yet one can argue that given the novelty of their profession, their lives, and their sexuality all being controlled by men, it is interesting that women like Hira are able to create an identity for themselves. In this sense, the play may be seen as a success in its discussion of the anonymous and yet extraordinary lives of tamasha women performers.

Examining the two plays *Medea* and *Her Mother's Story*, both are written in the 1990s within the parameters of a contemporary sensibility. If the former is radical in its approach with the protagonist going to extreme lengths and drastic measures to achieve the end, the latter works with the limited resources available to her to make her life meaningful. In the end both have been able to depict enlightened women convincingly.

Conclusion:

In trying to analyze and understand the thematic choices in the plays discussed above and the women characters thus created, the plays perhaps attempt to question why women have been hitherto fashioned so relentlessly in this manner, that is, passive, victimized, submissive, static, one-dimensional and resilient. Though many of these characterizations have occurred in women's plays as well and the plays show that women are not free from stereotyping men even as they protest against male stereotyping of women, but what has also occurred at the same time is a considerable change in the narrative with the changing times. The changing attitude in women's lives towards education, marriage and employment is suggested as a variable of the times and its demands. Moreover, as mentioned above, the plays must be viewed and understood within the purview of carrying individual and unique qualities and not always as binary opposite to the women created by their male counterparts. At the same time they must not be perceived as "always and essentially resistant" in nature. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan argues in terms of writing by women that while "one must read resistance...stressing the political fact of women's writing with all its attendant dangers and differences,

but (*not*) at the cost of neglecting the achievement.”⁷³ One is not glorifying the plays by women as the only objective accounts of portrayal of women. But perhaps one seriously needs to take into consideration their work because for the first time one does see women trying to regain their hidden and suppressed voices in a written narrative as well as in the form of stage productions and search for an identity in the midst of cataclysmic changes that were under way. While words are being put in the mouths of these women characters, it is significant to note the trajectory of women’s lives and the cultural space in which their lives change through the agency of women. As for the plays, they allow us an encounter with women dramatists across regions, working in different time periods and above all constructing a language that gives them the authority and freedom to explore and create their own narratives while making the process in turn more enriching and intense.

⁷³ Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, *Real or Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. Routledge-London, 1993.

Chapter Three

Theatre Space in Punjab

“The theater, which is in no thing, but makes use of everything -- gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness -- rediscovers itself at precisely the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations.” Antonin Artaud.

These lines seem apt to describe a theatre space which might not be called mature and organized in terms one understands theatre in Bengal or Bombay or even in the South. Nonetheless, a space does surface and a language is discovered to mark the beginnings of what came to be known as modern Punjabi theatre. Though it continues to remain at the periphery of academic and theatre oriented discussions, it nonetheless attracts my attention as I probe in to attain a better understanding. But before we venture into theatre space in Punjab, a quick look at modern Indian theatre in general seems imperative.

Theatre in India is as diverse and multidimensional as its people and culture. India has had a lively tradition of drama and performance from the flowering of the classical temple and court traditions, to the broad spectrum of rural genres, to the modern and contemporary explorations on stage. All realized in different spaces across India, each space as distinguished and characteristic of that region, creating an aesthetic environment and what seems to be a promising theatre experience. However, the rise of modern Indian theatre experience was not smooth sailing in colonial India.

The Beginning of Modern Indian Theatre:

A number of writings on the colonial period have pointed out that two hundred years of intrusive penetration and colonial domination over India was not a period that can only be defined in terms of a purely political or an economic imperialism. There was also a cultural imperialism. Every aspect of Indian life, social, political,

economic and cultural was affected as and when it came under the influence of colonial modernity. It was disruptive and came to displace the traditional way of life.

Under the impact of the western culture, the theatre also came to acquire a new form, which was more of an imitation of the alien theatre. Inspired by the British colonial theatre, Indian owned professional companies and proscenium auditoriums sprang up in the main cities in the nineteenth century. This western form of theatre came to influence the regional theatre practices, which were perceived as inferior and undeveloped. Infact, the traditional theatrical practices of different regions were exiled from the land of the theatre as mere rural entertainment and a 'civilized' campaign was started to incorporate the 'backward' Indians into the theatre culture as if there did not exist at all any sort of theatre.⁷⁴ Thus, began a new journey that was marked by heavy shades of the western theatre in content and overall structure but its patron and practitioners were the English educated aristocratic Indians. Initially, the theatre started with the staging of the English dramatic plays in English such as those of Shakespeare and others, along with their translations and adaptations into their own languages, slowly paving the way for Indian themes primarily based on the Sanskrit dramas. This new urban theatre aimed at entertaining the middle classes with lavish and gaudy spectacles based on either Hindu mythological or quasi-historical Indian themes. The latter half of nineteenth century saw changes in the social and political conditions paving the passage for exploiting the stage as a means of reaching vast audiences for purpose of education, public opinion and propaganda. Theatre came to be seen as an important medium of encouraging nationalist sentiments amongst masses and above all exposing the evils and brutality of the British policies. The provocative power of theater was soon realized to arouse patriotic passions among spectators. In this sense theatre has been seen largely as a political tool and as an important medium for constructing an informed nationalist ideology and serving

⁷⁴ Nemichandra Jain. *Indian Theatre, Tradition, Continuity and Change*, Chp 3, Modern Age: Struggles and Explorations, p66.

the cause of nationalism particularly in the late 19th and early 20th century. It became the medium for putting across on stage many a discourse of a nation in the making.⁷⁵ As a result, one notices a tremendous shift from the private houses of the rich patrons onto the public stage in order to mould public opinion more effectively. At the same time, one needs to also keep in mind that the theatre did not grow at the same pace and to the same extent everywhere. Therefore, instead of a uniform process modern theatre grew at different levels in different languages and regions of the country.

It was the Bengali professional stage that has been acknowledged as the guiding light of modern Indian theatre for uniquely using stagecraft to put across their indigenous artistry and capturing the sentiments that ran deep and high during the period. They were the first to react to the new influences in the form of printing press, though introduced with great reluctance, which in turn popularized new literature, further engendering dynamic forces embracing social, political, national and artistic consciousness. Following immediately upon or almost running parallel to this was the Marathi theatre nurtured in Bombay cultivating a popular and a more commercial form of theatre engaging both dramatic and musical elements as well as adopting a style that provided people with immense entertainment. It would be just to, hereby, mention the ever so dramatic and mobile Parsi theatre that dominated the Indian cultural scene around late nineteenth century. Like its counterparts in modern Bengali and Marathi, it employed the prevailing local languages (Gujarati, Urdu and Hindi), used the European-style proscenium with richly painted backdrop curtains and trick stage effects, and depended on spectacle and melodrama to create audience appeal. In the south, Kannada theatre is perhaps the most vibrant. One gets to see a spectacular and wide range of mythological productions and performances and

⁷⁵ Minoti Chatterjee, *Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage: 1905-1947*, Indialog. 2004, "Theatre is an important medium to awaken the popular feelings of patriotism, combined with a space being provided largely for entertainment. In the context of the national movement, theater expressing various genres to mould public opinion." p.34.

creating plays in a language style of its own. The interrelated Hindi and Urdu theatres of north India spent their formative years in the school of Parsi theatre, whose traveling companies scored box-office hits but equally earned criticism from the Hindu commentators and in its place were offered historical and covertly nationalistic plays by great Hindi dramatists like Jaishankar Prasad.

It is with this brief knowledge of modern Indian theatre in place that I intend to devote the present chapter to a study of modern theatre in Punjab in pre-independence period, a region which was one of the most backward of the Indian regions in this respect.

Drama in Punjab:

Theatre itself had little presence in north India particularly in Punjab. Often situated under the category of 'regional theatres', it does not share the same passion and fervor as Bengali theatre. Nevertheless we find some evidence of the existence of a rudimentary form of drama in the early nineteenth century in the north Indian plains. Emerging in the form of an oral-narrative tradition, the folk-religious theatre survived as a performing art in what was known as the country of Punjab covering a vast region from Kashmir in the north to Rajasthan in the northwest, not forgetting the districts of Lahore, Rawalpindi and other areas of 'Pakistan Punjab'. In this regard Richard C. Temple's *Legends of the Panjab* presents itself to be a very important primary source. A book compiled and written in 1884 allows us an insightful peep into the rustic world of bardic tradition of earlier times whereby the legends and folktales have been recited and handed down from generation to generation and thus are a valuable source well preserved. *Swang*,⁷⁶ is a sort of semi-religious metrical play in which episodes from the lives of celebrated heroes are depicted. It is partly recited and partly performed by professional ballad singers or a company of male actors on the

⁷⁶ A folk theatre tradition known in this period as *Swang*. It is a musical form of theatre featuring full-throated male singers, loud, arousing drumming on the *naggara* (kettledrums), and dancing by female impersonators. The tradition seems to have originated in the Punjab in the early nineteenth century, developing from recitations of ballads and oral epics.

occasion of festivals like Holi, Dussehra, Basant. Professional or amateur, the practice developed according to different local traditions. The fact that the Panjab constitutes of such a vast region, “a shared system of codes and symbols, including the lingua franca Hindustani, its specific meters and songs set to popular folk tunes, and the common body of folktales, enabled the actors, dancers, and musicians to communicate easily throughout the region.”⁷⁷ There is an episodic commentary by the main speaker though of an unconscionable length. Divided into three elaborate volumes, in this book the author has collected a wide corpus of versified legends narrated by the bards, and at times by the professional ballad singers known as *mirasis*, and at other times by the *bhat*, the *bharain*, the *jogi*, the *faqir* spread over various provinces of the Panjab. An important reference is to the form of *swang* sung by the priestly depository of the sacred legends of the Hindus. It is held together by the narrator, the storyteller as well as the one responsible for carrying the action forward, such as it is. He is not a distant observer. Instead he mediates between the actors and the audience to bridge the distance and invite emotions with his own standpoints and in return asks for approving the good and criticizing the bad in the play. On the other hand the actors in the *swang* make no attempt to identify totally with the character they are supposed to play; they accept the role as it is and attempt to fit the role. This structure is further ornamented with the medium of songs that have a clearly emotional function. They serve to highlight a moment already apparent in the play. The folk theatre tradition in this regard formed an important and integral aspect of the rural way of life. The significance of Temple’s book is highlighted in the several scripts of popular theatrical form of *swang* documented by him and his emissaries with much patience, effort and after enduring many exigencies of the time.

⁷⁷ Kathryn Hansen, “The Birth of Hindi Drama in Benaras, 1868-1885” in *Culture and Power in Benaras: Community, Performance and Environment, 1800-1980*, Ed. Sandria B. Freitag. Berkeley: University California Press, 1989. p64.

Temple was exposed to the *swang* tradition while attending the Holi festival at Jagadhri.⁷⁸ He later called the actors in private and had a scribe copy down their verses as they recited. He also prevailed upon *swang* performers to give him their private manuscripts (Temple 1884, 1: ix). Temple's *swang* singers were Brahmins, of a higher status than other types of bards, and some of them were literate. They engaged in playacting as a profession (Temple notes they are "called in on payment always"), but Temple gives no information on their backgrounds or features of their performance. His remark that the *swang* "is not strictly a play according to our ideas" seems to refer to the third-person commentary provided by the *rangachar* (stage director) and by the characters themselves, and also to the absence of European conventions of scene divisions, curtains, and scenery (Temple 1884, 1:243).

Having said that it would be interesting to look at some of these scripts that would perhaps give us some idea of how they were performed and presented. As mentioned above, mostly performed in villages during the time of fairs and festivals as a medium of entertainment, these *swangs* were largely of two types—historical and religious. The few *swangs* that I include herein are basically the popular legends of Puran Bhagat and Raja Gopi Chand along with others such as the legend of Guru Gugga, and the legend of Sila Dai. To briefly summarize them, an interesting aspect of these plays has been a common preference for a hero whose virtuous life may help arouse religious feelings among the people. Another common feature is that all these *swangs* often begin with a small prayer to goddess Saraswati, Lord Ganesa, and at times Lord Shiva asking for the ability and wisdom to recite and be able to successfully narrate these legends with grace. For instance,

The son of Siva is elephant-bodied! (At his feet) I bow
my head!
O Lotus-footed Lord of Gauri, Lord of the Earth, favor
me!

⁷⁸ Period not known.

Favor me Lord of the Earth! O mother, take up thy
abode in my throat!
Give me knowledge of good verses: the people have
come to see play!
I have a strong desire in my heart to relate the legend of
Gopi Chand.⁷⁹

Similar renderings have been made in other *swangs* as well. To begin with Guru Gugga as actually played by the 'natives'. Introduced in the form of narrative passages, characters are made to speak without any introduction as in a real play. After much prayer and suffering many dilemmas Raja Jewar, a Chauhan Rajput and his Queen Bachchal go to Guru Gorakhnath performing many days of service and worship and asking him to fulfill their desire for a child, a heir to the throne. At the same time Queen Kacchal, Bacchal's sister, also prays to Guru Gorakhnath to fulfill her heart's desire for a child. Mistaking Queen Kacchal to be her sister he grants her a wish, blessing her with two sons and ordering her not to come back again. Queen Bachchal unaware visits him again. At this the Guru gets very upset, for he had already granted her two sons (fruits) yesterday. However, after learning that he has been deceived by another woman, he blesses her stating that her son will be Prince Gugga and that he will be beautiful, brave and miraculous. At the same time Raja misled by Queen Kacchal questions Bacchal's virtue accusing her of having illegitimate relations with the *jogi*. As a result she is thrown out of the palace and she makes her way to her parents' house. Gugga has now grown into a handsome, brave, and a beautiful young man. However, his arrival does not appear to please his cousin brothers Urjan and Surjan. The twins were quite surprised to see Gugga and began demanding their share in the hereditary property. Gugga did not pay any attention to their demands but he did not know that the twins were planning a deceit against him. They all decided to go hunting one day and a trap was already laid for Gugga. In middle of the jungle, seeing Gugga wretched with thirst, they find the moment right and draw their

⁷⁹Captain R.C.Temple. *The Legends of the Panjab*, p1-2. No.xviii.

swords out to slay him. But the reverse happens resulting in the death of the twins. His mother gets very upset at the news cursing his son for committing such a wicked act and asks him to leave. He takes the oath that he shall never see his mother again and leaves.

The next *swang* telling almost a similar story is the legend of Puran Bhagat written first by Qadir Yar in the traditional style of a *qissa* and sung by some Jatts from Patiala. To briefly tell the story, Puran was the son of King Salwan and Queen Acchran of Sialkot in West Punjab. He was born to them late in life after long prayers and repeated pilgrimages to holy places. In the meantime the king himself contracted another marriage with the daughter of the tanners, Luna, who he met on one of his hunting expeditions. She was as charming as she was arrogant and though she accepted his proposal, she did so, on a pre-condition that she would be lodged in a separate palace. The first look at Puran made Luna forget the fact that she was his stepmother and she began to fantasize about him as her husband. On learning about her intentions, Puran was outraged and resisted any advances made by her. But strong-willed a woman that she was, she forbade him to run away and in a frenzy of passion tried to assault him and threatened Puran with dire consequences. However, the King was told an entirely different version of the actual events. Blindly in love as he was, the king was full of rage and ordered immediate execution of his only son and his dead body to be thrown into a well. One day while drawing water one of Goraknath's disciples saw the dead body and once the body was brought out it was infused with life. Puran came back and his hands and feet were duly restored. From then on Puran turned into his disciple.

The last legend that I am going to refer to is that of Sila Dai. A very popular story, it is also composed in the form of a *swang* or metrical play, and was also played annually at the Holi festival. This is a version that was played at the Jagadhri in Ambala district. As per Temple's record of it, the composition displays considerable dramatic talent, and the story is well put together to match the taste

of the audience, though considerably long drawn. This story is read as part of the full-story of Raja Rasalu. It begins with Raja Rasalu and his minister Mahita playing a friendly game of *chaupar*⁸⁰. The raja plays a trick on his minister in order to test the boasted virtue of the latter's wife, Sila Dai. As a result he orders his minister Mahita to go to a far away land of Fort Rathas to buy horses. Unaware of the Raja's true intentions he plans to leave but before he does so he commands his door-keeper to remain on guard at all times and take care of the lady of the house. The following day the Raja visits the minister's house, calling himself Mahita, saying that he has come back as "the cry of a partridge, a bad omen came upon me."⁸¹ When Sila Dai confronts him, she requests him to leave. But keen to test her he asks her to show her virtue. He says,

"Eyes are given (us) to see the beauty of the world.
Without seeing (thee) I go not, I swear by the holy Guru.
Without the holy Guru, without knowledge, sight is
worthless.
And for seeing (only) were the sun and moon made.
All people go to see each other's conduct:
So show thyself to me today, Sila, my beloved!"⁸²

Despite much insistence on his part, Sila Dai refuses him and asks him to come when her husband is at home. Somehow Mahita, comes to know about what happened and curses his wife for bringing shame on the family. Not in the mood to know what actually occurred, he whips her body many a time for lying to him, forces her to put on the clothes of a widow, and confines her in a small room in the palace. Sila Dai, not able to endure any more suffering, writes a letter to her parents asking them to come and fetch her. In the meantime, the Mahita agrees to

⁸⁰ It is a kind of a board game and the board is generally made of cloth and is in the form of cross. The game is played with a dice. A similar game was played in the epic of Mahabharata between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. In the manner the game played an important part in deciding the fate of Pandavas, in the same way its technicalities played a significant role in deciding the fate of Sila Dai, Mahita's wife.

⁸¹ Temple, *The legend of Sila Dai*, 1977, p271.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p279.

her father's request to hear her side of the story but he does so by putting her through various tests, such as the game of *chaupar* and putting some hot boiling oil into a caldron having Sila bath in it, to see if she retains her virtue. Sila speaks,

“My mother was virtuous, virtuous was my father.
Test my virtue, for virtuous I am.
Virtuous am I and God is my witness.
The Raja came and deceived me.
Then Said he, ‘My sister, take my ring.’
And I said to him, ‘Give the ring to the merchant (my
husband).’
And when he was going away...that he secretly placed
the ring on my bed.
This great and undeserved blame, see, he cast upon me.
And upon this (my husband) with blows thus cut my
skin.”⁸³

Sila passes both the ordeals. However, Mahita thinks otherwise. Soon after she leaves for her parents' house and he takes up *sanyas* and becomes a *jogi*.

After having briefly discussed these stories, their examination would perhaps be interesting to understand the characters, the plots and in a sense extract the very essence of these legends which formed a very integral part of people's daily lives, and gave meaning to their otherwise ordinary and conventional way of life. Fluid in time and space, the mythical narrative(s) bring together the world of mortals and gods over a span of time incomprehensible by rational causality, even as it encompasses the miraculous and the improbable.⁸⁴ As discussed above, there is a common preference for a hero whose virtuous life is seen as exemplary and helps arouse religious feelings among the people. It becomes more apparent from a reading of the texts wherein all the central characters of Gugga, Puran, Raja

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p302-303

⁸⁴ Pankaj K.Singh. *Re-Presenting Women: tradition, Legend and Punjabi Drama*. Shimla,2000.

Rasalu, Gopi Chand, are devout and loyal disciples of Guru Gorakhnath. Under his blessings, all of them achieved their knowledge and spiritual powers. For instance, in case of Raja Gopi Chand, having been deceived by a fake *yogi*, he prays to Gorakhnath to show him the path. He says,

“A doubt hath arisen in my mind, Sir Guru; I tell it thee.
If thou be a real and true teacher, my lord, blot out all
my doubts.”⁸⁵

In the context of Puran Bhagat, it is said that so miraculous were his powers that when he came to Sialkot and camped in a barren garden, the next minute the garden was laden with flowers and fruits. But above all, the narratives, whether of Puran Bhagat or Raja Rasalu, are essentially male centered and unequivocally hostile to women. The characters might not be belligerent, but the situations and circumstances are made so, because we do find evidence of a very strong bond between the mother and the son; a bondage so extravagantly glorified.

An interesting feature that struck me was that all these male characters are very caring and loyal to their respective mothers, so much so, that they have put her up on a pedestal and they are the first one to notice if something is bothering their mother. Just to give an example, when Gugga’s mother comes to know that his son’s marriage cannot take place she gets very upset. To this Gugga reacts:

“Why dost weep, my mother? Why art so miserable?
Why dost thou not speak? Why is grief in thine heart?
Tell me mother; mat the saint protect thee!
What? Has any one spoken evil to thee with lips?”⁸⁶

In the case of Gopi Chand, his mother is worried that his son might also get killed. In order to protect him she wonders if it is possible to convince him to become a

⁸⁵ Temple. *Legend of Gopi Chand*, Vol. 2, p16-17.

⁸⁶ Temple, Vol.1. 1977, p175.

jogi and give up his throne. Finding his mother sitting sorrowful and thinking about something he asks;

“What? Hath any queen of the palace said shameful words to thee?

I will flay her skin and fill it with chaff; I will throw her into the pit. Tell me truth, mother, why is thine heart sorrowful?”⁸⁷

As opposed to the ideal character of the hero who is endowed with a brave and powerful personality, with an over emphasis on the tales’ moral purpose of virtue, courage, obedience and courage, the women characters are often presented as the victim. They are to manifest such loyalty to their respective husbands that a step beyond convention results in many a finger pointed at them questioning their loyalty. Presented as models of womanhood- self-sacrificing, enduring, giving and preserving, women characters of Queen Bacchal or Sila Dai have been victims of deception planned by Raja’s co-wives, sisters, and sisters-in-law. Both tend to accept their sufferings and sorrows as something that was given, written in their destiny and therefore cannot be blotted out. In this sense, tricks are a very common device for helping someone or taking revenge on someone. Some tricks are played to help the hero to achieve his goal and others, especially in the case of women are malicious. They (women) are seen as vicious women who cannot be trusted and therefore are to be punished as severely as possible. Dependent as they are on society and its traditions, that in order to prove their innocence, they have to go through countless tests and sacrifices. This stands true in the case of Sila Dai who is seen as an embodiment of virtue but has to go through two ordeals to prove her chastity.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Temple, Vol.2, 1977, p4.

⁸⁸ The idea is not to highlight the patriarchal oppression of women in the legends (though it is quite evident). The purpose of including these *swangs* in the study is simply to reflect upon theatre as played out in the earlier periods. Rather than focusing on the gender politics, I have incorporated them to show how myth and drama are juxtaposed; a crucial part of the folk culture. Significantly, these legends- Western or Indian, continue to preoccupy theatre practitioners’ imagination.

Another important aspect of these plays is the significance of marriage, as a custom that occurs in every tale. Nevertheless, it is still a ceremony conducted in the orthodox way. In all, it is a custom that has continued and been followed very religiously in all tales. Lastly, a very important item in the construction of these stories is the notions of temporary death, for the *swangs* have ample instances involving the death of the hero and other actors and their subsequent restoration to life.

On a whole, most of the stories are worked out on the same principles. They present conflict, but the established order is not questioned, ethically or socially. The conflict is not that of an individual pitted against social odds. Rather, it consists of a situation, often created by the machinations of a villain. The characters act and react within a given situation.⁸⁹ There are these difficulties and ordeals the hero and, at times, the heroine has to go through to achieve their goal. The way the stories are told, it seems a lot of hard work and a careful thought process must have gone into their representation. What makes their study even more significant is the fact that they are all intertwined with each other. All the heroes are connected in some way or the other and yet have an individual story to tell. No matter how rustic their presentation may have been they nonetheless help us grasp some idea of the structures and “the modern human being in his mental and physical aspects”.⁹⁰ A study of valuable sources such as these *swangs* indicates that drama was an important component part of the popular culture in Punjab. Spectacles like these were interwoven into the fabric of public religious life.

Punjabi Drama on the Urban Stage:

Urban theatre in Punjabi language arrived relatively late. Unlike the other regions, as mentioned above, drama and theatre as a form in Punjabi has not had a very eventful record, or a consistent one for that matter, of growth and evolution as it

⁸⁹ Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*. Oxford University Press, 2006, p241.

⁹⁰ R.C.Temple, Vol.1, 1977, p viii.

has been somewhat sporadic and fitful. In Punjab, national theatre as a genre or the genre of commercial theatre did not exist on the scale it did in Bengal, Bombay and even in the South. It did not have a cultural tradition of theatre as such. What did get attention though, as mentioned above, were a wide range of stage presentations (not in the sense of the proscenium stage that came much later) of *Lok-Natak* or folk drama in the form of rasilas and ramlilas, swangs, naqals, followed by the induction of Parsi theatre in early part of 20th century in the urban areas of the north by professional groups who toured the country, and storytellers mesmerizing the audiences with their songs and dances, coexisting with each other, influencing and getting impacted in return and thus bringing us close to an understanding of Punjabi drama and theatre in the early periods. Drama in these forms was presented without the provision of any proper stage platform. Performers and the audience existed together in a common area and any spatial distinction between the two was absent. It was these wanderers who dispersed across Punjab keeping drama and theatre alive, preserving the vital skills that survive even today by the slenderest of threads because after all the idea behind any production is to tell a story, some do it in order to drive home an important point or message, others do it by provoking social change and there are still others who do it solely to explore their creative abilities while still providing entertainment.

When one talks of the history of Punjabi theatre, academicians often tend to demarcate the study into various periods. The way history of Punjabi theatre is divided into more than four phases: pre-1913 years, 1913-1947, 1947-1975, 1975-1990 and post-1990 years. While usage of periodization on one hand proves useful for a layman to understand the peculiarities of each period and how things worked, one must not take them as fixed for history is continuous and not amenable to generalization and there is bound to be overlapping. Having said that, the period before 1913 was a phase that saw quite a number of plays being translated from Sanskrit, English and other languages into Punjabi. For instance, Dr. Charan Singh's *Shakuntala* (1899) translated from the *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*

by Kalidas. Other translated works include *Comedy of Errors*, *Silver Box* and so on and so forth. At this point only the written version of these plays came forth rather than being performed on stage. As far as stage performances were concerned it was a space dominated by the Parsi theatre companies touring in Lahore. Som Benegal writes, “With its high key melodrama, its unabashed hybridization of western and oriental forms, its insouciant plagiarism, its bewildering concatenation of verse, song, dialogue, irrelevant comic interludes and miracles and its garish decors”⁹¹, Parsi theatre remains probably the first and perhaps the only commercialized, mass-entertainment medium in Indian theatre’s history. J.C. Oman’s *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India*⁹² is one such primary source that provides us with useful insights into this study. He makes constant references to the fact that in Punjab especially in Lahore there was no concrete theatre activity taking place as such. In comparison to Punjab, Bengal had already witnessed establishment of three full fledged theatres. For instance, the Calcutta Theatre, built at a cost of one lakh rupees in 1775 was followed by a succession of play houses like Wheeler Palace Theatre, the Chowringhee Theatre, to name a few.⁹³ At the same time, Oman also gives us eye witness accounts of at least five plays staged in Lahore of which he gives detailed analysis of three.⁹⁴ His mention here is significant for his insights into a period that did not witness a concrete form of theatre and yet a space existed. In other words, the wheels were already in motion in some form or the other.

Having said that, serious form of theatre or the modern Punjabi theatre arrived only in the first half of the twentieth century. It functioned in a number of

⁹¹ Som Benegal, *A Panorama of Theatre in India*, ICCR, Popular Prakashan Bombay, 1968.

⁹² Reference to this work can be found in Satish Verma, *Punjabi Natak Da Itihas*, Punjabi Akademi, Delhi, 2005.

⁹³ Minoti Chatterjee, *Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism, and The Bengali Stage 1905-1947*, Indialog, March, 2005, p8.

⁹⁴ Verma, 2005, p.33-34. The first one was called ‘Aladdin’ based on stories from Alaf Laila written and played by a Parsi company consisting of at least ten men and one woman in the troupe. The first and second play namely ‘Inder Sabha’ was both presented by a commercial drama company. The third play called ‘Prahlad’ was sponsored by a rich business man in order to highlight the religious content of the play evoke the same emotion amongst the city people.

complex and interrelated ways. It seems apt to begin with Nohra Richards,⁹⁵ who is fondly remembered as the 'nani' of Punjabi theatre. It is interesting to point out that it was a woman who propelled others to take up drama and theatre seriously. It was with her efforts that an indigenous stage could be created in Punjab and since then Punjabi theatre has been evolving and progressing consistently if not aggressively. At the turn of the century she was the first one to sow the seeds of the beginnings of an organized form of theatre in Punjab by establishing the Saraswati Stage Society⁹⁶ to direct plays in English. She started with the playwriting and direction of the widely popular Shakespearean plays such as *Mid Summer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Spreading the News* all staged between 1911-1912. She was aware of the fact that students of Dyal Singh College, Lahore, where she was appointed as a professor, came mostly from villages and would often speak about their villages. In her sense, "One way of doing this would be to bring into existence of plays that would amuse and also interest the villager(s) and helping to enliven his days and stimulate his imagination." A result of this exercise was that such plays were first put up in colleges and university, easily becoming a recreational activity with time. This made the dramatics program a successful one. For instance, a Youth Dramatics Corps was organized in 1954. Clearly in Punjab at this time amateur groups served by young play-writers came up infusing a technique of realism into their plays. Its inception was evident in plays of S.S Bhatnagar, Rajendro Lal, and I.C.Nanda. *Karamat*, *Dina Ki Barat*, and *Dulhan* were their respective plays dealing with social themes of the period. They dealt with problems of child marriage and undue expenditure at weddings. This academic theatre, if one may use the term, in a sense inspired the new breed of Punjabi playwrights who took upon themselves to write in Punjabi and work with what was available at their disposal and simultaneously have their take on the works of great masters of the West. Perhaps one can partially argue that modern Punjabi drama came in

⁹⁵ As Irish woman and wife of Mr. P.E.Richards, professor of English at Dayal Singh College, Lahore.

⁹⁶ Satish Verma, *Rangkarmian Nal Samvad*, Punjabi Sangeet Natak Akademi, Chandigarh, p.11.

existence partially under Western influence.

In this sense, it would be interesting to also look at the question as to what extent theatre in Punjab was a direct result of British colonization as the case was in Bengal and other areas wherein a national drama came into being, reflecting upon themes usually involving issues of freedom, anti-colonial and anti-establishment themes. It was definitely a movement of cultural protest which sought to challenge the values of the dominant culture and to create alternatives.⁹⁷ In the case of Punjab, it seems, that theatre as a medium was not used to direct outright attack on government policies, for any kind of public theatre that did exist at the time did not reflect the patriotic mood as such. Instead of direct confrontation during the pre-independence period the focus was concentrated upon reflecting on issues of social reform, preaching against the orthodox values and for improvement in societal norms. If not anything more we do find evidence of themes related to social reform, plots revolving around matters meant to provoke attitudes towards social change. Playwrights like I.C.Nanda amongst many others had probably realized that straightforward presentation of their resistance against the government would not be allowed on the public stage and in order to voice any such opinion they chose a middle path that would give an opening to their expression. Social concerns were voiced intelligently in the plays by I.C.Nanda, one of the first Punjabi playwrights to have used theatre and expressing it in a distinct Punjabi idiom. He was the foremost student to work under Nohra Richards and succeeded in forwarding the theatre tradition to a level which may seem very direct, dealing with stereotypes and offering simplistic solutions to crucial social issues. But given the theatre tradition of those times and the means available for them to exploit, I.C.Nanda has produced a number of important works worth a mention here for they were written at a time when no systematic theatrical standards existed in Punjab which he had to adhere to. He clearly set standards for himself. To reflect on his works may be seen as a step taken in order to understand perhaps the first set of Punjabi plays written and directed, thus

⁹⁷ Chatterjee, 2004, p.7. She writes predominantly in the context of the Bengali theatre.

taking them as the starting point of the modern Punjabi theatre. Employing the vernacular syntax, his maiden attempt was in form of his play (later titled *Dulhan*) staged in 1913. It is the story of Lajo a girl of only seven years old being substituted as bride in the wedding ceremony meant for the elder sister Melo, who having refused to be coupled with the elderly bridegroom, escapes from her home just an hour before the time of actual ceremony.⁹⁸ This was followed by the more popular play *Subhadra* (1922). The theme of this play is widow remarriage which was considered dishonorable and even sinful in the middle class Hindu families in those days. It presents people living in villages. The main woman protagonist Subhadra is a widow barely out of her teens and is childless. Her mother-in-law subjects her to unjust treatment abusing her over domestic chores and calling her ill-omened who has eaten up her husband. Subhadra's brother Paramanand, a college student influenced by new ideas, is determined to help his sister from the misery she had suffered at her husband's house. He thinks about getting her remarried somewhere else. Aware of his situation Sunder Das a class fellow offers to marry his sister. Soon, the ceremony is secretly performed in a temple and everybody seems to be relieved with the step taken. Another significant play published in 1928 was *Lily Da Vyah* whereby Nanda once again, affected by social influences, tries to highlight his concern for societal issues and dealing with the Hindu middle class living in cities. Lily is the granddaughter of a rich contractor and daughter of a barrister of one of the London courts of law. The grandfather had arranged for her a private tutor, Jaikishen, who eventually falls in love with her and vice versa. Lily's father is set against her marriage to a poor teacher, though the more liberal grandfather has no objection. But when Jaikishen threatens to make public the letters written to him by Lily, the father agrees as well. Very briefly, the ploys used in all the plays clearly echo his interest in social reform. They may be seen as satires targeted at the domestic and social problems of the middle class Punjab. They are an illustration of the century old clash between the old and new values of society. The plays written and staged around this time, it is argued, seem to take a lot from the Shakespearean plays in terms of

⁹⁸ Kartar Singh Duggal. History of Punjabi Literature, Sahitya Akademi, 1992, p333.

technique and style. But they should not be seen as pure imitations of structures influenced by western theatre because playwrights have had been conscious of their surroundings, their traditions and cultural history in bringing in something from their own lives that would make their work meaningful.

Following the footsteps of Nanda there have been prominent playwrights and directors namely, Harcharan Singh, Balwant Gargi, Atamjit, Ajmer Singh Aulakh, Sant Singh Shekhon, Surjit Singh Sethi, Harsharan Singh, Harpal Tiwana, Keval Dhariwal, and Gursharan Singh. The latter took upon himself to take theatre to villages and the rural folk, intermingling with rural classes as the proscenium stage could only reach urban audiences. In this sense, Indian People's Theatre Association has been quite an effective organization that came into being in 1943. The IPTA movement revitalized the theatrical forms in the post independence period in a politically and ideologically committed manner. "It opened up several possibilities, rediscovering folk forms and traditions and in the process connecting them with the mainstream through fresh innovations, taking theatre beyond the colonial architecture to the development of a more realistic mode, locating itself in specific regional-dialectical cultures with a passion for authenticity."⁹⁹

As far as drama is concerned, many plays were being penned down engaging with societal issues, those related to women, while others reflecting on the religious elements, and some criticizing bureaucratic corruption.¹⁰⁰ But from the perspective of them being performed on stage, as mentioned above, theatre space

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.220.

¹⁰⁰ The first category often consists of plays by Nanda; examples of those centred around women and psychological temperaments are Balwant Gargi's *Pattan Di Beri*, *Kesaro*, *Kanak Di Balli*, and *Loha Kut*; Punjabi theatre was also marked by a new theatre movement in the form of Shatabdi theatre (1965) associated with the celebrations of the third centenary of Guru Gobind Singh's birth and four years later on the occasion of Guru Nanak's quin-centenary and as a result a number of plays were written and produced such as Harcharan Singh's 'History Demands an Answer', Balwant Gargi's *Sky and Earth are the Platters* (1969); Harsaran Singh's *Lambe Samay Da Narak* (1975), Charan Das Sidhu's *Kal College Band Ravega* (1981). We thus see that through theatre Punjabi drama has been able to expose audiences to diverse subjects but those from Sikh history and legends have been more consistent in getting accepted than those from the contemporary period.

was very limited. A significant factor for initial years, apart from theatre being done in Lahore by the Parsi companies, has been the theatrical activity conducted by the university and departments of drama. It was a very unique development in the form of college theatre whereby theatre was used widely as a means of education, propagating a culture that brought college into the experience of producing plays in a time when Punjab as such did not witness any 'organized' theatre movement. Another factor that might explain why theatre could not probably become immensely popular with the wider audiences could be that by this time cinema as a creative medium had gradually begun to assert its monopoly. The talking pictures of those days were more or less akin to stage plays and had, in addition, several other features which the stage plays lacked. Moreover, watching a film made fewer demands upon ones' understanding than watching a play. It is understood that "drama being (an) intense action is concentrated art and requires concentrated attention."¹⁰¹ It may be argued that sole dependence on the text, and the absence of strong theatrical performances at that point in time, resulted in popularity of the cinemas attracting more attention. It is also interesting to note that movies encouraged and attracted more women artists than theatre ever did.¹⁰²

This being the case, perhaps one can point out that though the atmosphere might seem as dull to many, but definitely not dispirited, for the creative artists of that time were often able to find their way to expression. At that time, drama was

¹⁰¹ Richards, 1956, p21.

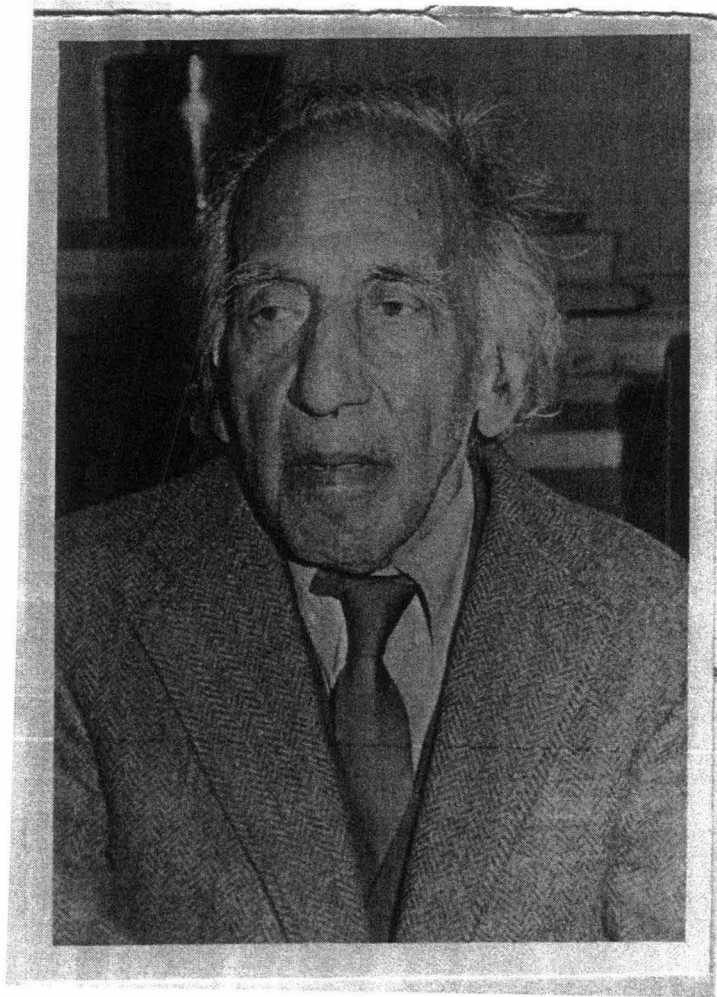
¹⁰² It is interesting to note that there were two types of films that were showcased at Lahore cinema halls- English and Hindi productions. The Tribune (Lahore, Ambala, Chandigarh) reports these shows in the form of advertisements. Almost a daily feature: for instance, one ad goes, "Empire Cinema, Lahore, Wednesday 12th and Thursday 13th at 6 & 9:45 p.m., 'The Enchantress', starring Doris Kenyon." Dated, Wednesday January 8, 1919. In 1941, English movies were a regular feature at the Plaza and Capitol, Lahore. Whereas, Prabhat, Regent, Ritz were booked for Indian movies. Actresses like Shobhna Somarth, Noor Jahan, Devika Rani, Monika Desai, Manorma, Sudama Samarth, Nadia and others were prominent on screen. Example: "Third week at Palace, Daily 6:30 & 9:15 p.m., Devika rani in 'Achhut Kanya'", Dated, January 6th, 1937, p3; Similarly, "New Theaters' Super Achievement 'Raj Rani Mira' featuring Durga Khote, Prithvi Raj, Uma Devi, Ratna Bai, 7 & 9p.m., Ladies Matinee on Monday and Thursday", Dated, Tuesday, July 27th, 1937, p5; "NISHAT showing 'Wafadar Aurat' featuring Miss Bina" Dated, July 18th, 1937, p5; "Tonight at Shanti . Prabhat Film Company's Social Super hit 'Amrit Manthan' featuring Shanta Apte. Chander Mohan", Dated, July 25th, 1937, p16.

taken up more as a recreational activity rather than a serious art form. Nohra Richards writes, “For drama to be integrated (seriously) into education, from babyhood to adolescence, would be to sow the seeds of theatre and some would germinate and take root, but roots must be nourished and top soil cultivated before a plant can make good.”¹⁰³

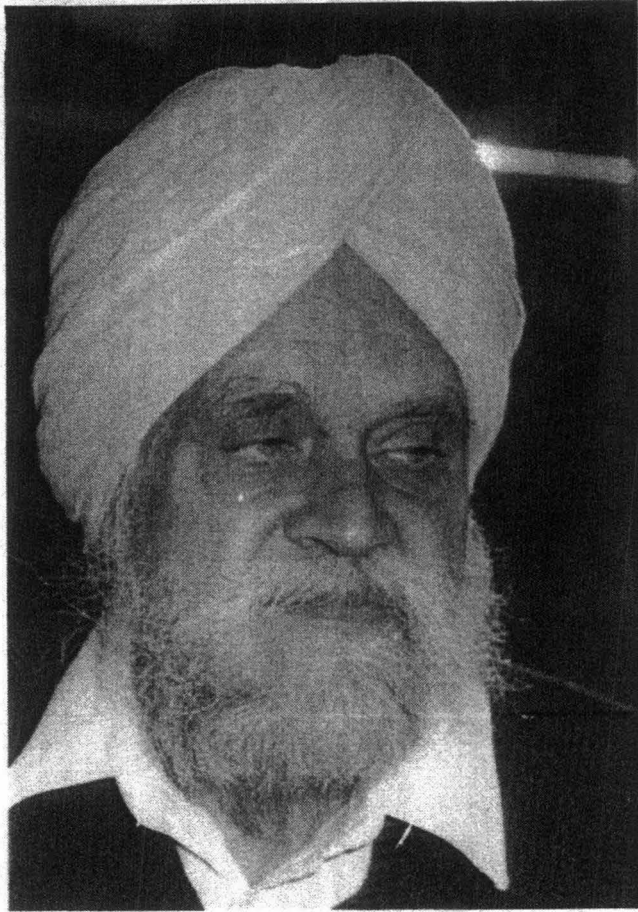
Conclusion

Despite all the positive that folk theatre embodied, its significant influence on modern Punjabi drama and latter’s genesis from a young and an ambitious theatre front into a fairly consistent and progressive activity in the present day context; unfortunately it seems to have failed to please the government and state authorities enough, who have contributed next to nothing to uphold what may be seen as a precious legacy. It is this lack of support from the establishment that seems to have marred if not altogether stunted the growth of what could have been a booming theatre venture. Nonetheless, this is not to imply that theatre practitioners were or are completely vulnerable and helpless for they have been able to sustain largely because of their invincible passion towards this art for the past so many years, creating a small but meaningful and eloquent history of their own.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p14.



Balwant Gargi; Courtesy Sangeet Natak Akademi.



Gursharan Singh; Courtesy Sangeet Natak Akademi.



Harpal Tiwana; Courtesy Neena Tiwana's Personal Collection.

Chapter Four

Women in Punjabi Theatre: A Case Study of

Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

While it would be wonderful to claim that Punjabi theatre today witnesses a bustling growth of women dramatists across the scene doing some amazing work and impacting theatre like never before however, it was a distant reality in the first half of the twentieth century given the very nature of theatre with its male dominated superstructure. It is a fact agreed by scholars alike that theatrical conventions everywhere in the world have tended to exclude women from the stage for many years. As a form of entertainment that extends back to classical Greece, drama has been the most traditional and conservative of all the arts; as a public and social institution, theatre has been male-dominated.¹⁰⁴ Punjabi stage was not devoid of this indifference towards women. Until 1940, women hesitated from coming onto the stage in Lahore. With the efforts of Harcharan Singh, the first actress to have stepped on the Punjabi rangmanch was his wife Dharm Kaur. In an interview he points out that before 1940, boys used to enact the female roles since girls from respectable families were not allowed as the stage and the entire enterprise of theatre was considered disrespectful. Ishwar Chander Nanda himself had played many women centric roles in the initial periods. In 1940-41, for the first time Harcharan Singh introduced his wife in the play called *Anjor (Unequal Coupling)* on the Lahore stage. He says, "She was ready to come on stage with my first play in 1938, but keeping in sight the atmosphere that prevailed in my village, I decided against it. And when I finally presented her I had to face a lot of anger and protest from family as well as outside."¹⁰⁵ He also points out that along with her wife there were two more girls who acted for the first time and they were Devika Rani and Raj Kaur and though today it might not be considered as a matter of grave concern, but in those days entry of women on stage was opposed. To invite more girls to participate, an appropriate advertisement was published in

¹⁰⁴ Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama-Freud, Feminism, and European Theatre at the Turn of the Century*, Cornell University Press, 1989, p16.

¹⁰⁵ Satish Kumar Verma, *Rangkarmia Nal Samvad*. 2002, p59.

the newspaper. Perhaps one can argue, that a space had begun to open for girls from respectable families to perform on stage though this number was very miniscule.

Keeping these initial beginnings in sight, the first woman to have made significant inroads into theatre in Punjab was the charismatic Shiela Bhatia. Despite the fact that there was not a single professional stage in Punjab and the fact that the amateur movement, born in colleges and theatre clubs was active yet poor in standards, we get to see the rise of a notable woman dramatist, born and bred in Punjab trying to define a certain sense of the Punjab and its people, its tradition and culture. Her name seldom appears in the history of Punjabi theatre, and perhaps it is more the reason that she requires more than a mention of the name. Born in the pre-independent period (not known) in Sialkot (in Pakistan), she embodies a personality full of candor and versatility. As an actress and a director she had been quite successful in carving a niche for herself in the times when women were hardly part of the theatre enterprise. It seems that she was one of the fortunate ones to have had the chance to interact with theatre without any major hurdles given the kind of life that was conventionally meant for girls in her family and other families alike. According to her autobiography, she writes, that living in Lahore and experiencing life the way she did was the most 'formative period' of her life. Her acquaintances¹⁰⁶ such as eminent people like Balraj Sahni, Khushwant Singh, Balwant Gargi, Chetan Anand and Dev Anand working in theatre and films in Lahore left an indelible mark on her psyche only further encouraging her towards her chosen path. Through her work she was able to embark upon a style that was unique to her and perhaps the reason that drew a lot of attention towards her as a person. Along with known names on the Lahore stage like Sneh Sanyal and Swatantrata Prakash, she would go from street to street

¹⁰⁶ She prefers to call them acquaintances because these meetings were just that. She makes it very clear though she had the freedom to nurture her passions of singing and doing drama they all had to be achieved while remaining within certain limits. She was not allowed to tag along just anywhere. Nonetheless, these minimal interactions, she urges, seem to have had their deep impact on her way of perceiving things to a certain extent. J.N.Kaushal, *Shiela Bhatia*. National School of Drama, 2000, p26-27.

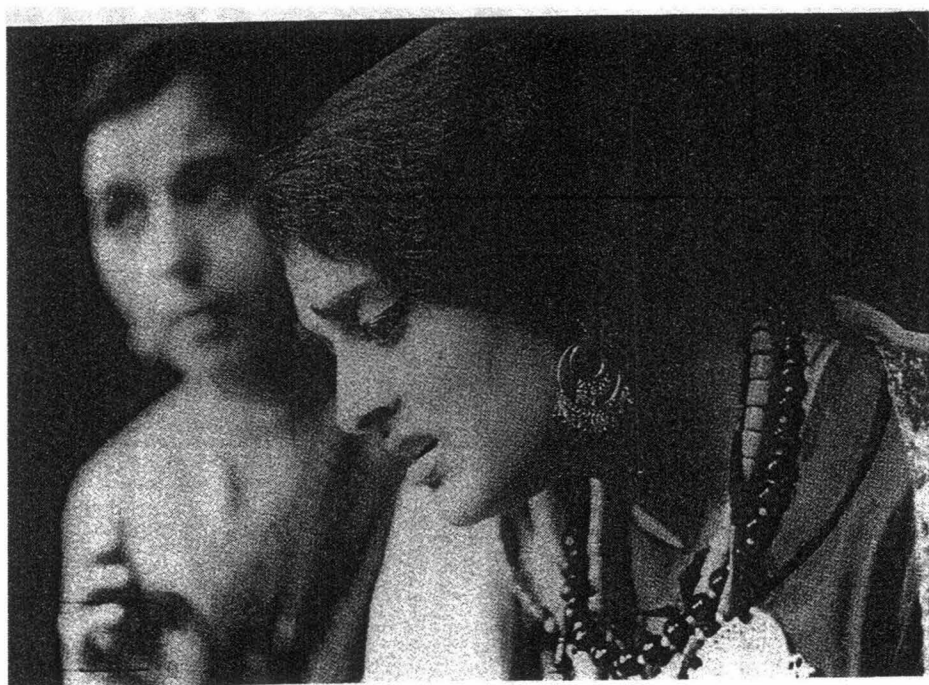
and perform small plays concerned with issues such as riots, those related to women, freedom and others. For instance, she performed her first song at a ration shop in Lahore in 1942. She sang:

“Stand up Young girl, your country calls you.
There is no sugar or flour in the cans,
No oil or wood found
Your children are dying hungry,
Get up and do not finish yourself.
You have to satisfy your hunger on your own,
You have to cover yourself on your own,
Save your owner,
Because our leaders are helpless.”¹⁰⁷

What is peculiar to her style is her experiment with the genre of musical opera and the fact that she used her songs in the form of plays to highlight these issues. As the time progressed she became more active in her ventures and got inducted into Lahore IPTA and its activities. Inspired by the wave of freedom and the patriotic fervor that filled the atmosphere, she created her work. She started with *Call of the Valley* (1951), which was hailed as a musical opera with great depth. When she came to Delhi, she started the Delhi Art Theatre and under its banner directed a number of remarkable plays like *Chann Badlan Da* (1966). Collaborating with other artists she came to produce a vast corpus of plays namely *Kissa Yeh Aurat Ka Hava Se Hippie Tak* (1972), *Yasmeen* (1977, inspired by Lorca's *Yerma*), *Tere Mere Lekh* (1985, inspired by Lorca's *Blood Wedding*), *Main aur Who* (1999). It is amazing to note that she was able to survive for literally five decades due to an astounding degree of commitment and passion towards her work. Above all, it was her allegiance to her style of theater- a mixture of folk music, dance, and drama that allowed her to transcend conventions and, what she considered as, man-made barriers. As Chaman Ahuja writes, “her work was led not so much by her knowledge as by her intuition (for)

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 2000, p63.

she had had no formal education.”¹⁰⁸ Instead her musical pieces were more a product of what she gathered from life, and themes inspired by the rich folk heritage of Punjab. Her mention here is worth it for she was not only a powerful performer on stage but had a strong inclination towards playwrighting and direction.¹⁰⁹ She was amongst the first woman directors of the IPTA period hailing from Punjab with a desire to explore. Her plays are portraiture of the IPTA activism and a kind of cultural activism that defined the times she lived in.



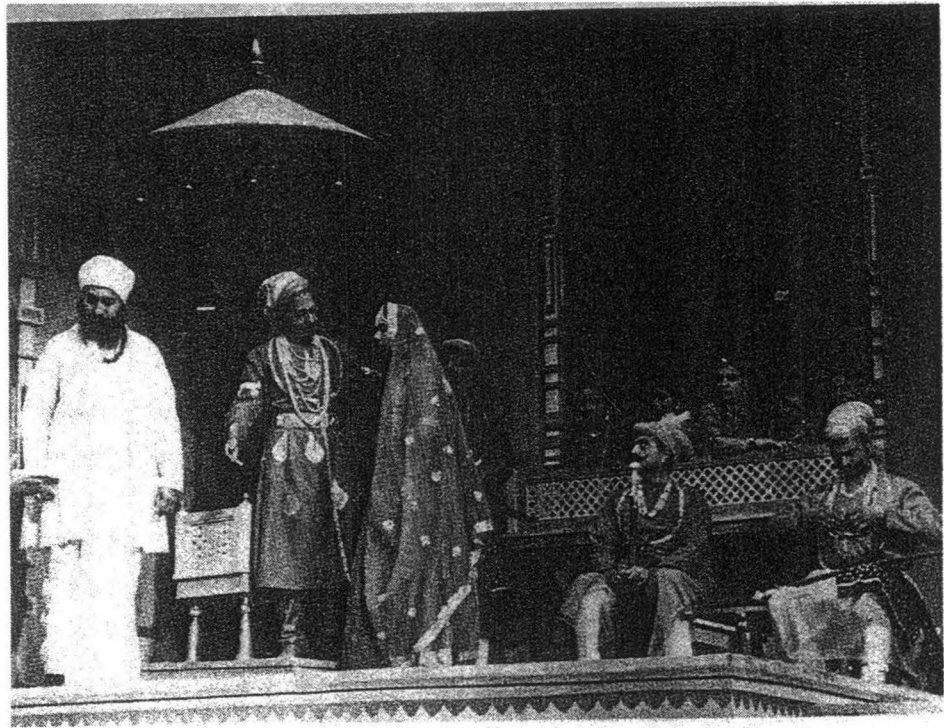
Havva Se Hippiie Tak (1972) Directed by Shiela Bhatia

¹⁰⁸ Chaman Ahuja, “Theatrical Phulkari”, in *Theatre India*, No.4, November 2001, p.36.

¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately I have not been able to include her works as part of this dissertation since they are still unpublished and therefore unavailable. It is quite surprising that woman of such caliber and vast corpus of work under her belt has not been seen as worthy of academic or for that matter theatre studies.



Shiela Bhatia; Courtesy Sangeet Natak Akademi.



Prithvi Raj Chauhan (1863) by Shiela Bhatia.

While she continued producing some of the most fascinating works she also came to set an example for many of her students. One such student who studied theatre under her at the prestigious National School of Drama was Neelam Mansingh Chowdhary, a talented and innovative director in the contemporary theatre who not only has done pioneering work in women's theatre in general but has also earned considerable amount of appreciation for her work in relation to Punjabi theatre. The fact that presence of women in Punjabi theatre has been marginal for a very long time both onstage and offstage Neelam Mansingh's work especially her productions require special mention for their pleasant mix of the traditional and the modern. The present chapter is structured around her works. As a strong personality Neelam Mansingh had imbibed western influences to a greater degree. As it is said, "a man (*in this case a woman*) travels the world in search of what he needs, and returns home to find it."¹¹⁰ In her case as well she traveled, due to her

¹¹⁰ George Moore, the author.

husband's postings, most of the time away from home and in other cities like Delhi, Bombay, Bhopal, but it was in Chandigarh, in the form of her own theatre group, The Company (1983), that she found her firm grounding, using the local tools to create something truly magical. She created a theatre that fuses source material from Western classics with a performance style rooted in an earthy Punjabi aesthetic. Many perceive her productions as mere reworking of the classics, both Western and Indian and this tends to undermine, in a way, the very context in which these works are produced. In the theatre circles in Punjab often her work is appreciated but it is done only in terms of its technical excellence, the way the stage space is utilized, the use of lighting, colors, props, and above all the use of Punjabi language.¹¹¹ Perhaps one can argue that it is these very ingredients that, when put together, for instance in her case, make a particular revised work more engaging and fascinating, and thus captivating the eye of the audience. This is not to say that she simply decorates the whole thing just to lure people because clearly her productions reflect that sensitivity towards the themes she chooses and believes in. There is little doubt that western theatrical styles have in the past guided the modern Indian theatre, and in this context the modern Punjabi theatre with the basic environment for the latter to sprout and cultivate its own path in the process. Not surprisingly, the hold of the former remains even today, though not overbearingly, providing with a sense of continuity in stories, themes and formal styles. This progression is very much notable in Neelam Mansingh's plays ranging from the Greek masters to Racine and Federico Garcia Lorca. But every time a classic is revived the text is treated in such a way that the performance reveals new meanings and intentions and this becomes possible perhaps because of the unison between the western classics and the boisterous culture of Punjab,

¹¹¹ It is argued by her predecessors and contemporaries alike that plays "she has done (*are*) not Punjabi plays but Punjabi adaptations of outside work." Chaman Ahuja, "Theatre Phulkari", in *Theatre India*, No.4, November 2001, p.42. Perhaps one can argue that language is an essential part of the total theatre experience. She points out that she has had a very slender relationship with Punjabi and it was not until 1984 when she returned back to her home state that she learnt to read and write Punjabi. Having been associated with the veteran B.V.Karant for a long time she realized that in order to do a sensible theatre she needs this linguistic recovery as " language is not only sound. it is also myth, emotion, mood, and cultural history."

thus illuminating the essential regional flavor at one level, and a purposeful amalgamation between the folk and the urban at the other, through skillful acting against a backdrop designed with the appropriate measure of beauty and visual drama.

Having said that, in the following pages I shall attempt to discuss some examples of her diverse productions and simultaneously try and understand the kind of women characters that surface in the plays.

I begin with *Yerma*¹¹² (1992), the story of a woman slowly driven mad by her inability to understand why she cannot conceive a child. Married to Jeevan at her father's request, Yerma has tried to be the best wife she can. She has tried hard to make their marriage a successful one, but there has been no escaping from the confines of the four walls of their marital home. Believing a child will create a bond between her and her husband, her life becomes all consumed by the desire to conceive. A desire that remains elusive. For example the first scene shows her holding an imaginary infant in her arms, dreaming of the day when she will have her own child, playing with it, singing lullabies, and at times holding it tight to her breasts in fear of losing it. Another instance of her deep desire for a child becomes evident in her conversation with her friend Meeta who is expecting a baby soon. On learning about her friend's pregnancy she says:

“Yerma: How lucky you are!”

Meeta: But you know more about these things than I do.

Yerma: And what good does it do me? It's been two years and I am burning inside. If I keep feeling this I will end up turning badmash.

¹¹² Adapted from the play *Yerma* by Spanish poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca written in 1934.

Meeta: You listen to me now! No one can complain about these things. A sister of my mother's had one after fourteen years and you should have seen what a beautiful child it was?

Yerma: I have seen my sister nurse a child.

Meeta: They say one suffers a lot with children.

Yerma: Having a child is no bed of roses. We must sacrifice to see them grow. Every woman has blood for four or five children, and when she does not have them the blood turns into poison and it will happen to me."

As the years pass by her pining for a child increases ten fold. Realizing the child is not forthcoming, feelings of blame and guilt turn into seeking desperate measures. Throughout the play, one witnesses her eagerness to seek advice and help from whoever she comes across like the old woman on the street. It is her increasing hopelessness and agony that drives her to extreme limits of her sanity forcing her to take a step like killing her husband. In the end she cries out, "I am barren! I am barren! My body dry forever. I have killed my own child."

This may be followed by the adapted version of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1989 & 2005) by Neelam Mansingh with its gripping sensuality, multilayered text and openness. It begins with a playwright struggling to keep awake in the night. He is accompanied by flames that often spend the night together gossiping and sharing stories of their respective house owners. One such story is about a young girl Rani, the woman protagonist married to a man called Shama who never treats her right. While he is busy with his mistress whom he visits every night, a cobra assumes human form¹¹³ and visits Rani. Well placed in a typical village setting in the midst of chilly north Indian winter with folk music that

¹¹³ The cobra assumes Shama's form.

strongly empathizes with the everyday life that rolls by in contrast with the magical events in the story. Interestingly the contemporary theme of a woman trying to find her voice in the society is delicately entangled with the folk tale of Naga the cobra. Not being able to differentiate between the two, the real and the imaginary¹¹⁴, something she realizes it seems much later, she is pregnant with a child. She is time and again questioned by Shama and is ordered to go through a snake ordeal¹¹⁵ before the village elders that will prove her innocence. Surrounded by dilemma and no other way out she agrees to it and in the end comes out victorious. She is declared a goddess.



Rani and the old blind woman Bishani in Nagamandala; Courtesy, the Internet.

¹¹⁴ Rani wonders, “Do desires really reach out from some world beyond right into our beds?”

¹¹⁵ She is suppose to put her hand in the cobra’s nest and if he does not bite her she is innocent.



Nagamandala; Courtesy Neelam Mansingh Chowdhary.



Nagamandala; Courtesy, the Internet

The next play *Fida* (1998) is yet another of the many fascinating pieces by her. It is an adaptation of Euripedes' *Hippolytus* and Racine's *Phaedra*, containing within it echoes of the Punjabi folktale of *Luna* in the legend of Puran Bhagat. It is a story of a woman named, Fida, who is attracted to her stepson, Harsan, the prince. However, Harsan has already declared his love for Asvari, whom his father has taken in as a prisoner. Throughout the narrative Fida, driven by her burning passion and love for Harsan, curses herself. In Scene I, she confides into Bebo, her loyal servant. She says:

“Fida: My heart is parched with a terrible thirst for love.

Bebo: You thirst for whom?

Fida: He's the older queen's son, the prince, with whom I misbehaved and accused falsely...I detest my own self and I hate the mention of love. Yet where can I run...The only escape is death to hide my sinful thoughts.”

What makes the play stand out is Mansingh's potent ability to once again counter the given and fixed images of a woman as only a victimized, passive human self and explores women's desires and sexuality through the agency of women. In her adaptation, she explores the concept of womanhood and female sexuality. Fida had the voice of passion and yearning. In the play, conventional love is juxtaposed with unconventional love. She sees her Fida as someone completely innocent because one has to be innocent to love beyond social and economic conditioning.¹¹⁶ Though one does notice slight evidence of guilt of the protagonist, that guilt is little or overpowered by her suffering and passion for her stepson and her strength and courage to fight and face the consequences of her unacceptable attraction. In conversation with her loyal maid Bebo:

¹¹⁶ Lata Singh. 2005, p 313.

“Bebo: O Queen, don’t trouble yourself thus. Your crime is not beyond pardon. You have loved. You were charmed out of your mind by someone’s love. Who can battle with fate?

Fida: Again you have come with ideas to mislead me. Will you fill my ears with such poison till my death? What did you make me do? I have heaped false accusations on that innocent soul. The king will have him killed. May god punish us harshly. The fire of sin that flamed from my heart has scorched everything around me. Oh, what shall I do?”

To take a minute and compare *Fida* with other versions of the story of Luna it is interesting to point out that despite conforming to the original legend there is scope for theatre practitioners and playwrights to play with the text and create something new and pleasing every time. For example in Manjeet Pal Kaur’s¹¹⁷ *Sundran*, the focus is directed on the woman protagonist and not Puran who is the central subject in the folk legend. Whereas in the legend she dies in the end when Puran leaves her in search of his own peace of mind, in Manjit Pal’s version, her love is so deep and ennobling, it does not allow her to die. Like Fida her inner turmoil increases for she cannot be with Puran. She says:

“Feelings can’t retain even the fragrance of breath;
How than shall I trudge the path threatened with tears?
Confident of my courageous self I dared to reach beyond
the constraints placed by fate.
Now hopeless and helpless
I am left alone in my miserable state.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ She is infact the only well-placed women playwright of note in contemporary Punjabi theatre. Her first play *Sahiban* (1986) is a poetic drama that draws its subject matter from a medieval love story named after the heroine. Her most famous work comes in the form of *Sundran* (1994).

¹¹⁸ Manjit Pal Kaur, *Sundran*, in *Staging Reistance, Plays by Women in Theatre* ed., Tuntun Mukherjee, Oxford University Press, 2005, p402.

Clearly, Sundran feels betrayed and is utterly exhausted at one level but at another level she feels a new spirit and a strong desire to live and though fiery from within, she does not wish to end in a heap of ashes. She says: “yet, why should a woman wish for a martyr’s epithet? She desires life and so must live.”¹¹⁹

As opposed to Sundran, Shiv Kumar Batalvi’s Punjabi verse play *Luna* seems quite radical in its sub-text. From a male playwright’s perspective his version though centrally focuses upon Puran and his eternal sacrifice, he puts sufficient emphasis on Luna’s character. His portrayal of Luna suggests that he is aware of women’s psyche and their subordinate position in society. His Luna at no point comes across as a pitiful creature waiting to be rescued from her wretched life as an untouchable. When Luna realizes that she is going to be married to raja Salwan, she is very upset and angry at the proposal. She strongly argues:

“Daughters are born voiceless, voiceless they die. If they speak out, they are condemned, and abandoned by society...listen, friend, why should not a woman speak? When her hurt is so deep. Why should not she, throw to the winds, the restraints? This is no marriage, this is my doom. I, an untouchable, want an untouchable groom. Of my own status and caste. I would be better off, as a leather worker, than a royal consort. A burning coal is better than an extinguished oven. Why should youth, be not matched with youth.”¹²⁰

Be it Fida, Luna or Sundran, all go through a state of inner turmoil for falling in love with Harsan (in case of Fida) and Puran (step son in case of the first two) who rejects them. All three are unashamed of their feelings and deep love for Puran. In the end they gaze at the horizon not knowing what to do but wait and

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p403.

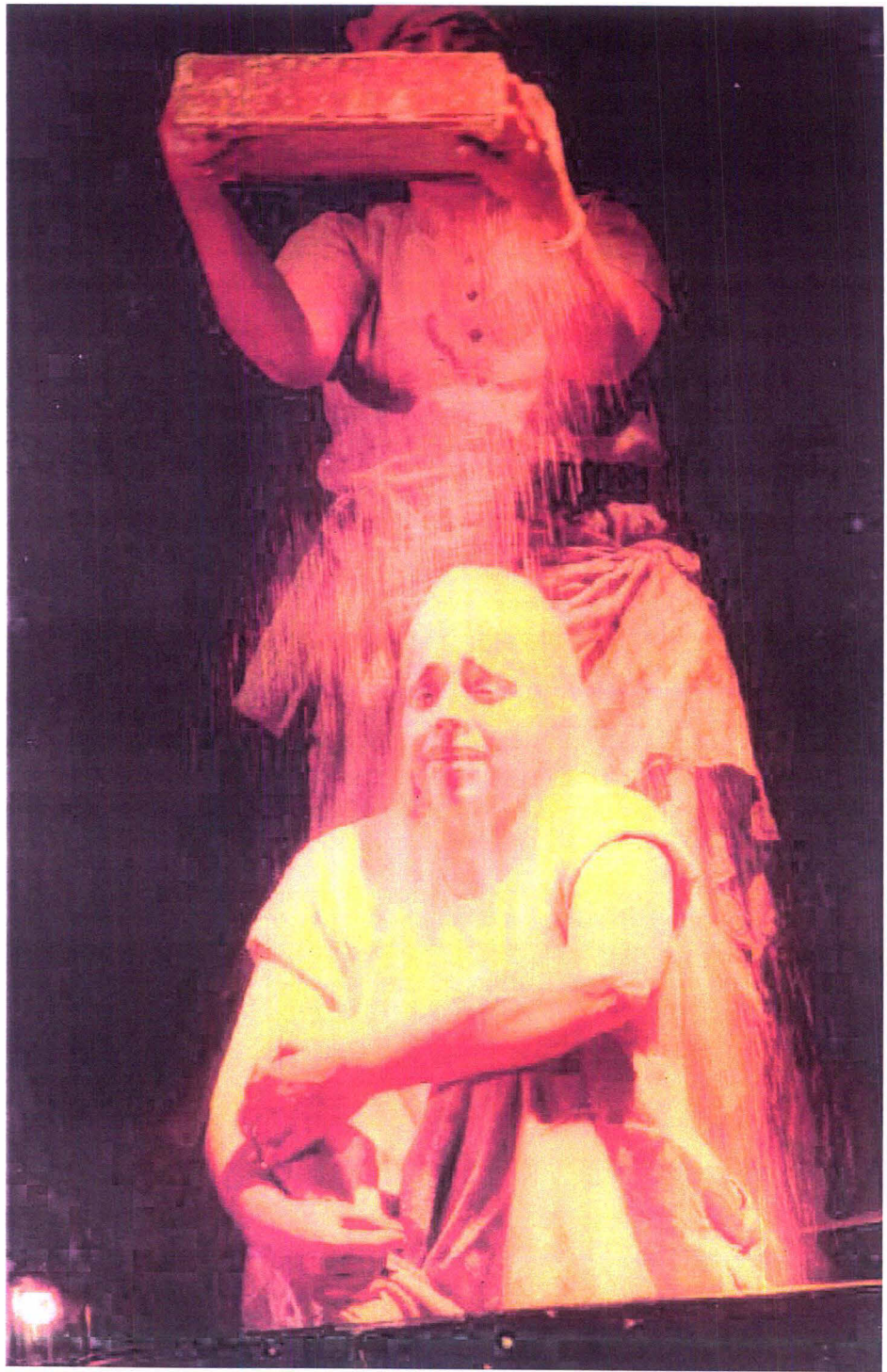
¹²⁰ Shiv Kuman Batalvi, *Luna*, *Sahitya Akademi*, 2003, p42-48.

hope. Both victims and survivors, Fida, Luna and Sundran are multi-faceted characters, expressing their love and pain.

The fourth play *Kitchen Katha* (1999) is as sensuous and meaningful, in its own right, as the first three. It unquestionably confers a different angle to the rest of the works briefly discussed above. Once again Neelam through her experimentation and introspective story-telling format adds a new dimension to the old age bond between women and kitchen. As the title suggests, the story is played out in a domestic kitchen space alight with the aroma of spices, grinding, cutting of the vegetables, beating the dough, frying and people engaged in cooking something or the other. The crux of the play becomes evident with Tara, the protagonist, saying, “Kitchen my story, kitchen my poem.” One immediately seems to associate with the imagery of food and a very Indianized plot wherein the passions, dreams, and frustrations of a woman get crushed while peeling off an onion, which according to Tara, has been the easiest way for women to cry and drain out their sorrows. A multi-layered narrative opening up with the above scene and slowly unwinding with the story of Chand Kaur, Tara’s grandmother, for the sake of Lakhari who is finding it impossible to write a play.



Kitchen Katha; Courtesy the Internet



Kitchen Katha (1999); Courtesy Neelam Mansingh Chowdhary.

After a succinct description of the plays, it is possible to arrive at a pattern that runs through Neelam Mansingh's productions. Undoubtedly, centered on female protagonists, the plots locate Rani, Yerma, Fida, and Chand Kaur within traditional patriarchal structures. Often the space is domestic and the interior becomes the mode whereby the form of the plot materializes. Morality and a certain code of defined behavior is expected from them. But as the story proceeds, we notice narratives of female self-discovery, moving away from a kind of 'decorum and encased representation' towards a more psychological probing. As opposed to plays by other woman dramatists that often centre around specific issue that needs to be addressed, making some sort of a social statement and aimed towards facilitating social change or demanding rights for their position in society, Neelam's plays may be called 'experiential' in nature. What comes across is the experience that is felt through a woman's body, moving on to a realization of the desires of the body. Starting points in these plays are often negative defined by a sense of helplessness but not dependency. Women as victims might seem as a staple plot, but despite certain weak moments, Rani, Yerma, Fida, and Chand Kaur come out strong and articulate. These women might seem distraught with their situation and alone at times devoid of any support yet they are standing strong and firm for what they believe. A myriad of emotions- love, desire, passion, agitation, and bonding flow through. Amidst much contention between characters, an individual woman personality already exists.

What strikes me most, is the fact that on the surface these narratives might seem as stereotypical representations of the age-old traditions of family, offspring, a caring wife intertwined with many of the feminine traits of essentially nurturing, sacrificing, loyal women characters. Culturally, wifhood and motherhood are privileged and determine a woman's whole existence.¹²¹ Themes of cooking (in *Kitchen Katha*) and motherhood (in *Yerma*) are often understood as synonymous with Indian womanhood and therefore these characters might not seem as major

¹²¹ *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces and Writings of Shashi Deshpande and Jasbir Jain*. Rawat Publications. 2003, p267.

shifts from the depiction of idealized characters. But herein, these emotions and the kind of suffering these women endure are not simply forced upon them. Yerma is not forced to feel the way she does. Similarly, cooking is not often considered a worthy chore but through Tara and Chand Kaur it is represented as an indulging and sensual affair. Food has been used as a powerful symbol that cannot be separated from any aspect of women's lives. For instance, when she is mixing the 'besan' she thinks of 'batna' and that makes her think of 'mehndi'. Her seductive spirit comes out while making the 'sharbat' out of the 'rose petals' and she feels one with Mangal while drinking the 'anar' juice. The fact that these emotions come naturally to these women protagonists, in a way tends to make a positive statement about Indian womanhood in particular and womanhood in general. It is as simple as complex about what it is to be a woman, a voyage of self-discovery and a wonderful experience.

At another level inherent in her productions is her bold recognition of female sexuality. Taking a minute and looking at the seminal works of Sigmund Freud, Gail Finney¹²² has appropriated and integrated his works to comprehend and further her point of view. She has done so in order to analyze women characters that surface in modern dramas by authors like Arthur Schnitzler, Gerhart Hauptmann, and Bernard Shaw at the turn of the twentieth century. Summarizing Freud's conception of the early development of sexuality¹²³ Finney writes that since he defines libido as 'masculine', he attributes less pronounced sex drive to women. He does not regard female sexuality as an 'active', independent drive. He firmly associates masculine sexuality with 'activity' and female sexuality with 'passivity'. While it would not be wrong to agree with the fact that prevalent stereotypes based on gender certainly play a role in determining male and female sexuality respectively, therefore producing significant differences in the way these issues are perceived and manifested. Then again, by defining sexuality in such fixed terms, as Freud does, one tends to undermine its complexity and multi-

¹²² Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama-Freud, Feminism, and European Theatre at the Turn of the Century*. Cornell University Press. 1989.

¹²³ As firmly expressed in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

dimensionality which may be equally applicable to both 'man' and 'woman'. Turning back to drama and viewing Neelam Mansingh's plays against this theory, it appears that her women characters are equally open towards acknowledging their sexuality as they strain against the confines of the conventional role that has been assigned by society. For instance, in case of Fida, she surrenders to her heart's will and that is to be with her step-son Harsan. Confiding in her maid she says, "Yes I burn for him- In my heart is a powerful yearning, That denies me a moment's peace." Clearly she has these passionate emotions for Harsan and they seem to go beyond the definition of simple love. Similarly, in *Kitchen Katha* one scene has been very aesthetically and yet sensuously directed that depicts Chand Kaur drinking 'anar' juice and the underlying emotion is that of making love to Mangal, her beloved, for the first time. These women are not ashamed or secretive at all when they are confessing their innermost desires. So far, female sensuality is the most prevalent and palpable in her characterizations. It seems that for her, sexuality extends beyond lexiconian definitions. It constitutes one essential quality of human identity and it includes feelings, emotions and thoughts just as much as the gross body.¹²⁴ They might be female figures belonging to a society that is symbolic of 'patriarchal domination', 'male pride', 'rural machismo', and 'unequal treatment of sexes' and yet we find an exploration of the powerful and liberating potential.¹²⁵

In a sense these productions may not reflect 'feminist'¹²⁶ but feminine consciousness. The women characters that emerge are passionate and aggressive beings who are able to find a way out without destroying themselves. The plays and stories they depict may be straightforward reflection of how women are overpowered by the values of feudal order and patriarchy. Despite the structures that surround these women protagonists, Yerma, Rani, Fida may be seen as intense individuals with a dynamic personality of their own. They understand

¹²⁴ Paramita Banerjee, "Male Understanding of Female Sexuality", in *Theatre India*, No.2, November 2000, p.48.

¹²⁵ Finney, 1989, p49.

¹²⁶ 'Feminism' as a historical or sociological term refers to the drive for equal (political) rights for the sexes. Finney, 1989, p4.

their environment and that makes them invulnerable. Each one of them meets reality on her own terms. To what extent these plays can be merely perceived as reflective of glorification of women's suffering, is difficult to speculate because their suffering is unique. Especially when these emotions are enacted on the stage, it makes these women characters more fascinating. Perhaps the credit goes to the director because it is simply commendable how these male textual constructs are taken up, reinterpreted and remoulded, and thus bringing forth meaningful and sensitive representations. In this case as well, the gender of the author continues to remain exclusively male, that is, Surjit Patar, and yet Neelam Mansingh through her qualitatively different attitude takes the story to a different level where it transcends into (sometimes) the anti-realistic and charismatic realm of folk culture.

An interesting feature of the plays that come forth is their background. Though an adaptation, what surfaces is her interpretation of it and in this interpretation lays the typical bearings of a typical Punjabi woman, an aspect common to *Fida*, *Yerma* and *Nagamandala* as well. The play reflects not a simplistic, linear, one-dimensional view. Instead it goes much beyond raising women's issues and attempts to explore the more mystical side of womanhood. What is it to be a woman? It is not only about being defined in terms of purely gender but explained in terms of myriad of emotions a woman's body goes through. At another level it may also reflect influences of multi-dimensional complexity of Shakespearian lays which are often marked by ingredients such as love, hatred, jealousy, blood and betrayal. In a way, Mansingh's works may be seen as a perfect amalgamation of classics from the West and a remoulding of it in the context of contemporary regional experiences. Above all, her plays and their contents focus on layered portrayals that transcend society's artificially maintained boundaries of given roles against the background of a mix of reality and imaginary landscape.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Anuradha Kapur, "A Wandering Word, an Unstable Subject..." in *Theatre India*, No.3, May 2001.

Through her stage productions she has been able to create images and identities of women characters that are both prominent and complex in their own right and are not to be merely seen in opposition to male hegemony that had so long controlled theatre history both on and off stage. Her plays that have been analyzed above are not merely play scripts but also pose as cultural texts. The Punjabi woman that comes forth is strong, passionate, fiery, aware of her surroundings, conscious of what she wants and what she desires? In line with the generation of the immortalized Heer, Sohni, Sahiban, the women characters discussed here are endowed with a romantic soul and are filled with the conviction of truth and courage to speak their mind. And perhaps it is the bold-spirited attitude towards life that also gives Rani, Yerma, Chand Kaur, and Fida a stupendous sense of perspective. None of the stories portray a woman pinning to death or hiding her love within her bosom. Instead the women are volatile and dynamic characters. These are women characters of extreme emotion and it is their passion for life that leads them towards extreme behavior. Yerma, Fida, Queen Kulmeeta (*Heth Wage Darya*, 1987) are clear examples of passion carried too far, sacrificing all. But none of this makes them bad women who have no control over their feelings. On the contrary, they are women full of life and laughter. They may be illiterate and pictured in a domestic space but they are independent, dare to dream beyond the real and weave around a web of imaginary landscape where they find themselves at utmost comfort. Their solitude becomes their ultimate solace.

In retrospect, one may argue that these women protagonists are not merely victims or self-sacrificial models of virtue. On the contrary, they are full of life, laughter and passion, holding out the promise of hope and gumption that all is not lost for the woman whose spirit is invincible. They are aware of themselves as individuals and therefore are able to live with a heightened sense of dignity, it seems. They embrace life to the fullest and that comes across in the respective choices they make in the face of crisis despite their rural moorings. They are perplexed by their immediate atmosphere and yet there is a ray of hope. At the same time, by empathizing with her female characters, Neelam Mansingh takes

care of the fact that she does not caricature the men. The manner in which the *naga* metamorphoses into the human form is remarkable and quite gripping. Apart from that, the engagement with the *naqqal* performers is truly significant. They have been like a backbone in her productions. She says, “The way they constructed gender on the stage was stimulating. They dissolve the positions of what it is to be a man or woman; they are the characters they play. I found my work too moving towards the androgynous.”¹²⁸ By teaming with *naqqals* she in true sense also seems to have transcended the gender boundaries by using the local folk performers. This also highlights questions related to gender, its accepted roles in society, functions of female impersonation in theatre.

In this sense, Neelam Mansingh’s very choice of plays and powerful gestures she gives her women characters brings out her conviction as a woman. It is argued that an essential requisite for the drama is its performance and therefore it would suffice to say that Neelam’s creations find their fulfillment not in the author’s text but on the stage. Whether ‘feminist’ or ‘traditionalist’, an analysis enables one to perhaps define her theatre as not so much about the contradictions, tensions, and energies of rural life, but more about women’s joys and sorrows, about their passions and anguish. It would be fair to say that it is unique to the sensibility of a contemporary woman director for whom women’s issues can no longer be confined to something which can only be seen from a fixed perspective. Her theatre, and the imagery it employs, allows space for these women characters to dream and indulge. It is full of visual poetry that makes explicit the general emotion at a particular stage in the play, “an expression of the inner voice, several images which appear unconnected but have a connection in the context of the overall experience (it) is exploring.”¹²⁹ In comparison to other works discussed in a previous chapter, her productions add a unique dimension to the broader repertory of women’s initiative in theatre. As a fine theatre practitioner, she tries to discover for herself the beauty, virility, directness, and the sophisticated naiveté

¹²⁸ Gauri Ramnarayan, “Restoring Lost Voices”, in *Frontline*, Feb 2008, p88-89.

¹²⁹ Kirti Jain, “Different Concerns, Striking Similarities” in *Theatre India*, No.3, May 2001, p27.

of the various forms, traditional and modern, and allows her work to be influenced by her discoveries.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Vijaya Mehta, "Search for an Identity through Theatre", *Sangeet Natak*, vol. 77-78, July-Dec, 1985, p20-21.

Interview with Neelam Mansingh Chowdhary¹³¹



Me: To begin with when did your interaction with theatre start?

N.M: I don't belong to a theatrical background at all. The only thing is that when I was studying arts in Amritsar, I had an inclination towards it. There was nothing in my environment to make me feel that this interest could be nurtured or developed. Also in most middle class families, at the period, the art form was seen more as a hobby than a profession. It is alright if you paint. Anyways, I came to Chandigarh to do my graduation and study history of art and eventually looking at various works of art. At that time, Balwant Gargi had come from America and was visiting the university. He was doing a play and he came to the fine arts department. So he asked, "If anyone is interested in acting in a play". And I immediately put my hand up. We started working but it was all on a very school girl level. It was fun. The atmosphere was slightly different from the rest of the university, which was quite conventional. The division was very defined. Chai ban rahi thi, roti ban rahi thi (Tea was being made, food was being cooked). The

¹³¹ Not to be cited. The interviews were conducted at her home in Chandigarh over three meetings. Dated, September 8, 2007 and June 7, 2008.

space at Gargi's house had a very bohemian look to it. Even the furniture was different; there were posters on the wall. One heard names like Elia Kazan, Tennessee Williams, Jean Genet, and other names one may have never heard before. One may have heard of Tolstoy and Dickens. It was like certainly a window peeping into another world. At that time, Ebrahim Alkazi, director of the National School of Drama drove some of his plays to Chandigarh and when I saw them it just blew my mind. First of all I never realized that there is a school that taught acting because what is acting? Thode se jazbaat, thoda sa stage presence, beautiful face, and that's it. But to train to be an actor, learn the technique, the craft seems like a different world. Now I had no idea what this world was. But when I went backstage out of my fascination for actors, I was amazed. There was one girl smoking, the boys and the girls talking to each other, kind of a camaraderie which I had never seen in my environment. I liked that world. It appealed to me. So I joined the National School of Drama. At that stage, training was not difficult for girls because they were in lesser proportion to the male population. Women were just taken in to complete the balance of the ratio; just a mathematical calculation. Most of the people came from the company tradition, came with a solid background. I (*on the other hand*) came from a peripheral background.

Me: Often the male playwrights and directors have come under fire for portraying their female characters in a certain way. The opposition comes from their respective female counterparts. Do you think it is necessary to compare the two sides?

N.M: The thing is that the word 'director' seems to suggest a male and a certain way in which they perceive women. Women were something to be seen at. But I think that there are some wonderful male playwrights and directors who have tapped the feminine indefinite. I feel when you write and you direct there is certainly a consciousness of one's own history, one's own gender. You cannot negate that. It should be androgynous. For me I have to see how a woman and a

man can be constructed performatively on stage. Sometimes the male eye just criticizes the woman. There is what we call a 'male gaze' that does come into play. As far as the comparison goes, I think as women are finding their position within cultural space, there is a positive shift. Infact, there are a lot of women working in a manner in which a man would have worked.

Me: Coming to your productions, most of them are adaptations of classics- Western or Indian. You have often been criticized for 'borrowing' and therefore 'non-creative'. How do you react and how do you handle the material as and when it comes before you?

N.M: It is a criticism I have got many times. I would call it as a kind of reaction to my work which is completely unfounded on many levels. If you are talking about globalization and literature being accessible to the world, why is that we are so parochial when it comes to theatre? I dismiss an argument like that because I don't think its even worthy of reaction. I am completely open to a dialogue but the fact of the matter is that when you take a text there are different contexts and you in certain way localize it to your own cultural need and I think (*in the process*) you are adding on to the sensibility of your literary history as well as when you translate it. Language is not only sound, it is also myth, cultural history, impulsive, an emotion and if your actors are local they also bring something form their respective lives. It is a completely spurious argument. It seems that you want to create a particular tool. Does Girish Karnad only belong to Karnataka or does he belong to all of us?

Me: What tools do you employ when directing a production?

N.M: Well! Every production is a result of collaboration, a dialogical process. For example Yerma, when we started working on it, it did not need to be adapted. Spain and India are both farming communities. Even the imagery and the poetry of Lorca, the references- harvests, children, celebration, and color are exactly

what you would find in your Punjabi poetry. Racine's Phaedra is like Puran Bhagat. The narrative had a complete resonance with it in a certain way. Myths travel. They just transform themselves according to the place in which they are positioned. A reworking is not merely imitation. It requires a completely different kind of structure. I feel that a play is not a literary text. It is a performative text. It belongs to me. The moment I do it, it is mine. I think the directors have that independence and they should.

Me: Since you are making a play for an audience, how do you conceive it in terms of performance?

N.M: It is very difficult to answer because your creative process is based on tangibles and non-tangibles and some times you don't even realize how it all comes together. And the consciousness of the audience happens much later. It basically gravitates towards the end as it depends on many things- what are the concerns that you have, where are you positioned at that point of time in life. So to some extent it's got to do with memory and source. For instance, 'The Suit' which I am doing presently, I saw this play in London in 1995 and I was kind of very affected by the story. In a certain way this play is not the like the kind of work I am used to doing. It is more realistic, very contemporary. Anyways, every production goes through with its own kind of situations. I did Nagamandala in 1989 but I was asked to redo it in 2006. There is no way I could have repeated the past production. The situation becomes more problematic because some of the actors were missing. How to wipe the slate clean? How to avoid repeating yourself? So every play presents before new challenges. What happens is what worked for you ten years ago, won't probably work ten years later. For example, in Nagamandala there are two endings. When I did it 15 years ago it had a sad ending which is that the snake dies. Don't ask me why? When I read the play again to be performed at Rangashankara festival, I said 'how stupid of me to use the sad ending'. Maybe 15 years ago one was more into tragedy and god knows what. But I wanted to show that the imagination never dies and so Rani says

'Come creep into my hair. You are safe'. It is so sexy. The way we think, look at the visual world changing, the instructions we give to the actors....Its part of a process and a process is a ritual. It starts from a seed and how a seed grows, what kind of form it takes, depends upon the whole dynamics between you, the group and the text.

Me: How different are your plays from the original works?

M.N: Completely! Because you have a source text and the other is a target text or target audience to which the text is delivered (*through performance*). And...I cant take a play from Spain and create...obviously one explores and one gravitates towards the text in which you find resonance with some aspect of what we are saying about human beings and human relationships that in turn has a resonance with your own thinking at that point of time. So for me it is very important that when I get a text, I read it, I get a sense of where the text is coming I terms of my homework and then just toss it aside. Until I can internalize it and make it my own, there is no reason for me to do it. Because whatever I do is somewhere coming from within my own experience. And today I have seen that most of the work is collaborative, it is collaboration between the actors and the director. You can't have a character which is based in Norway or France. How does a Punjabi actor move towards it? It can only move towards it by making connections and also disjunctions.

Me: Is there a common strand that runs through your plays apart from the fact that all are focusing on women protagonists?

N.M: Yeah! Sensibility, aesthetics. That is why I am having such a huge problem with the Suit, my current production. Because in no way I can use my sensibility, my settings my style of working in this particular play.

Well, in the sense that...When I am working, I definitely bring in a certain way of

working, a certain process that I have. But it is not a fixed process. As I mentioned earlier, it changes from production to production. Like when I did Kitchen Katha I talked about women and food. It was different from Nagamandala. Kitchen Katha really had no narrative. The images were the narrative. It was a different position towards a performance. We were celebrating food. How you would not buy a bangan and a tamatar and say 'Tamatar ki Sabzi bana do'. But you try to see it as medicine, as seduction, as a metaphor. So there were many layers to it. But Nagamandala is really a narrative. It has a fixed structure but even within that how you kind of toss it around. I think there must be a pattern but it's very ambiguous. It's just like if I plant a seed of a rose I know that ultimately there is going to be a rose. But I don't know where the branches are gonna go, you know how many roses will come out of the bush. So there are certain fixed moments and certain unexpected things that emerge from this kind of dynamics, this kind of interaction, this kind of encounter. Even though you are not talking about my latest play the Suit, it is based on a South African short story which is really about apartheid. Now we have no parallel and I wasn't going to superficially bring a dalit problem. Because even though there may be a political positioning towards the marginalized section of society but I can't be dishonest and say I know their reality. I come from a different historical, political, social context. So I would find it very fake to try and suddenly make a play about a reality which I have only access to intellectually, not emotionally or spiritually. Not in terms of the sense and the real nuance of it. So when I looked at the text I saw it as rupture between a man and a woman. As somebody who is part of life and has a family I can completely...It is not that everything has to be experienced first hand. You can experience it vicariously, by being open to life or people around you. So there are so many...There must be a pattern. To me it's unimportant. You see work of Manjit Bawa, you know its Manjit Bawa. You can immediately identify with Hussain's work. Please don't think I am trying to equate myself with these great masters.

Me: I can understand what you are trying to say. What is it that one can identify

with your work? This is a piece of work, ok this is Neelam Mansingh.

N.M: I mean I do have a group of actors that I have worked with for twenty years. They do bring a particular history into the work which is that I have performers who are from rural background. So they do bring that smell of something which I respond to and then I have urban actors, not in the Delhi sense.

Me: But Chandigarh is quite urban.

N.M: But in the sense that they are not from the national school of drama. So they have different kind of training.

Me: You just spoke about the significance of folk performers and what they bring to every single production. I think I have put this question before as well about you being accused of 'exploiting' these rural artists.

N.M: Yeah! But you know that is such an old criticism that today it doesn't really hold water. Let's just talk about the 'exploitation'. When I had started working with them twenty years ago they came under the beggary act. They were khanabadosh. They had no address. Today they have land; they have lovely homes, even toilets which have tiles and Indian style bathrooms. If you call that exploitation, I think it is more likely that they exploit me because they take so many advances for weddings, for education, for building their chhats (roofs). So in a certain way my Company that has traveled all over the world had absolutely nothing in the bank because all the time I have become somebody who gives out loans which are never repaid. So let's talk about the financial exploitation. And it's such a ridiculous question that I don't even wish to answer it. I feel that we are all wanting to dip into something to be able to train ourselves into a way of working. All over the world whether it is Peter Brook who comes to work on kathakali and everybody in India would say he is exploiting India. I find it such a kind of regressive way of looking at things. Eugenio Barba, Bertolt Brecht,

Grotowski, they have all been inspired by India. Arrey baba! What about us? We have taken the proscenium arch from them. Our theatre was outdoor, it was with lanterns; it was an assembled stage. We borrowed the proscenium stage, the western models of realism. When you take a so-called well made play, whether you talk of tughlaq and say it's written like a Shakespearean play. Or you talk about Badal Sircar and you say he works like the existentialist. Or you take some of the plays by Mahesh Elkunchwar and how Chekovian he is in his work. There is no issue there. It is all very well to go to the west and take their structures and then you dip into something which is part of your legacy. Mujhe to virasat mein mila na (I have received it in legacy). Even if I am not from the folk tradition, if you live in this land and if you walk down the streets of Amritsar or you go to Jallianwala Bagh or you go to a mela you will see a naqal performance, you will see the dhadis. If I am taking from something which is part of what I got in my own environment, it's contained within me. Let me tell you something, when I first got married and moved to Bombay I started working with Pearl Padam Singh. She was doing a lot of children's theatre and she asked me to join her. She was looking for a second person line in command or whatever. So I had one funda, coming from the NSD, that we must do plays in our local language. So I am telling these very high profile schools like Cathedral and G.D.Sumani that we will do a play in Hindi. They looked completely shocked because part of their reputation comes from making their kids speak good English. I said no Pearl's doing the English play I will do the Hindi play. So we did a play called 'Jasma Oral' and I found these very stuck actors in the workshops but the moment you created a beat 'tat tara ta, tat tara ta' everybody's body started moving. You play the dhol even the most stiff upperliped person will start moving. You may not know but somewhere you are carrying something na. You know exactly how to respond. I think it's so ridiculous the whole thing that I don't even wish to answer it. You see winds of change, you can't separate yourself from. The whole world was moving away from realism in late 80s and early 90s and everybody was trying to explore a way of working. In that exploration I wanted to connect with my own traditional impulses. I did not see it as a folk form but I saw it as

impulses I could kind of connect with and how it will enter in my work space.

Me: Infact, the interaction between the two, the folk and the urban comes across very naturally.

N.M: I think so. Because there was a period perhaps they were there and they were there. And now the funny thing is that people who see my work can't figure out who are the traditional performers and who are the urban because both have taken from each other. Anyways I don't see tradition as something static. I see it also in terms of its transformation. So how does it transform itself? Even today you see it in all the traditional arts. But what is happened is that most states are very conscious of involving experts, anthropologists to actually see to it that somewhere...Ok! Let me rephrase this. Yakshagana from Karnataka was also going the down way. Then Shiv Ram Karanth, not to be confused with B.V.Karant, the writer and the great scholar went there, learnt Yakshagana and then made them go back to their original costumes, the check saris, the headgear, the jewellery. So you got somebody who first learnt the craft and then how slowly by entering into their world he chiseled their world as it used to be.

Me: Coming back to your productions, to begin with the women characters that surface are helpless and in a subordinate position. The imagery that comes across is quite stereotypical in terms of representation but at the same time they are very assertive characters who know what they want and slowly they would move away from the given decorum towards more psychological probing. How do these characters figure in your definition?

N.M: I have never thought of it in this manner as you describe. But you are right to some extent. But ultimately they take charges of their own destiny and that to me is significant. For example, when you take a play like these days I am reading a lot of Ibsen because I am doing this project and all the women are slightly fragmented in their heads and slightly dark though not hugely. They all have

secrets which are very kind of convoluted. So that's a particular form of playwrighting. Lorca appealed to me because it really deals about patriarchy, feudalism and within that how women function. Nagamandala for me was not really about a woman who is submissive. I did not see it that way. I just followed the narrative in that sense. I did not dig any political position on it. What was interesting was more in terms of the world of imagination and the world of real, that why our imagination is considered less real than my talking to you. I remember in the early stages of my marriage it really use to bug me. When my husband used to say to me, I would say something, he would say 'I think you have just imagined it'. He would not understand why I would go up in smoke. Because I would say if I have imagined it, I have imagined it which means my imagination is such a real world for me. So for me the issues in Nagamandala were to do wit that very thin line and how actually we can make our lives into anything through our imagination. Also I tried pushing the duality in it, the duality of a woman who is quotidian and a woman who is taking flights of fantasy. So, even in your everyday chores, in the ordinary what keeps you alive, what brings poetry into your life? It's your mind, your heart, your spirit. In Yerma, which you must have seen on the tape because I was very young when I did that, I saw the yearning for a child not so much as a woman pinning for a child but more as a desire to renew and recreate yourself. So, the whole position...my actors asked me 'why she can't have a child? Is the husband impotent?' Please, you know, it is such a non issue. It's just that there energies don't meet. She's passionate and he's not. He's just a pragmatic kind of a person. For me the narrative is just a starting point. Above all for me it is all about exploring. For example in the Suit, which is about this man who discovers his wife in bed with another man and the man jumps out of the window and leaves his suit behind. So in some way the suit becomes a symbol of betrayal and rupture. So everything they do, the suit is a presence. When they are having dinner, she would say 'we have a guest so please clear the table for him' and the suit in the hanger comes out and is positioned in a chair. They go for a walk, the suit comes along. In the end the worst is that he tells her to make love to the suit, which is actually my own interjection. It is not in the story at all. It has

become such decay in the relationship. So he gives her the suit and she starts wearing it slowly and then he tries to pull it off her. He says, "Its mine" and she says, "Its not. It's my skin." It was a scene written as a result of my own way of looking at it. I could never work with a playwright who would say don't chop this or don't do that. Just like I cannot control the reaction of people saying that I exploit the folk artists, in the same way I feel a playwright should give me my space. Because you have written the play and it now belongs to the performers. Maybe... I don't like to be depressed. No matter how bad my situation may be, I never allow myself to sink. So it is also a personal trait and in that sense I see my women characters as well.

Me: In *Yerma*, even when she knows she cannot have a child, she does not stop imagining it.

N.M: Exactly! For example, when I was doing *Yerma* in Chandigarh people in the theater department would say that this is suppose to be tragedy but here she looks so sensuous, she loves. And I thought to myself when Lorca makes *Yerma* say that 'when I came to the wedding bed, the sheets smelt of raw apples'. Any woman who makes a remark like that...other people cried and wept when they got married but I was looking forward to it. Is it a child of sexuality or the awakening of her body? So, I didn't narrow it and I thought any woman who would say this can't be a depressive character. And even the washer woman's scene I had made it so kind of androgynous and so crass wit women fighting with each other and pulling each other. I don't want to pitify things. I wanted to show the contrast. Especially the endings, I like them to be nebulous.

Me: What I meant that these are the emotions all the women characters go through. And as opposed to early feminism that was anti-marriage, anti-family, the kind of women characters you come up with, to them these emotions come naturally. Yearning for a child is not imposed on *Yerma*. That the body is only meant for procreation. Through them it seems you are also making a very positive

statement about Indian womanhood.

N.M: The other thing is that we have to differentiate between the 'feminist theatre' and the 'woman's theatre'. I am not doing 'feminist theatre' which is very issue based, based on justice, social and political rights, lesbian rights and many others. So it is a different kind of theater. I am doing 'women's theatre'. Is it a separate genre? I don't think so. I respond to the works of Anamika Hakar, Anuradha Kapur, Amal Allana. They bring a kind of risk which I enjoy. Women seem to be taking more risks in their creative space than men. (Please have your Neembu Pani).

Me: Do you in any way identify with these women images?

N.M: You know what I do identify. It is a tricky question because the women I choose are not a reflection of me. But I do feel that there are certain issues they are dealing with which are interesting and it is the issues that I feel I can go ahead and explore. But I am sure somewhere they come from your experience because I think...I will tell you a little story. When I did Kitchen Katha, there was a kitchen and there was a little entrance to the kitchen which was made up of bamboo and I had hung a little swing on which I put a pumpkin. So my actors asked me 'why this pumpkin?' I said I don't know but it just seems right. They kind of laughed it off. I had gone to perform in Chennai and from there I visited Pondicherry. And I found that outside each shop there was a pumpkin. So I asked them why you have pumpkin outside your shop. They said 'Shubh mana jata hai' (It is considered auspicious). So what happens is certain images that you use don't come out of a calculated conscious choice. Somewhere in the archives of your memory something has lodged itself and it enters into your workspace. It was only after three to four years after the play had been done that I realized that I had found a pumpkin outside each shop in Pondicherry. You don't see that in North India nor in Delhi. I used to be so neurotic about the pumpkin, it had to be flat. So when I performed in Germany, Singapore or Dubai I used to take my pumpkin along.

God forbid woh pumpkin na mile (what if I don't find it). Similarly, when my father was a principal of the medical college, Amritsar where I grew up, right near this huge driveway and there used to be the quarters of all the staff members because Haspatal mein kitne kapde dhulte hain so there was a dhobighat and I used to love going there. So lot of my images like this washing scene in Yerma actually came from that time. I have a lot of times rolled up my salwar and join the guys pounding the clothes, putting the soap. Also Kitchen Katha, my father comes from a family of priests so when I would visit my dadkas we would stay in a gurudwara and so I used to go to the langar and do langar seva. So lots of things were community cooking. All these are part of your memory. So they are not separate from my consciousness.

Me: Also in Kitchen Katha the naqals are wearing the skirts and the women characters are dressed in short kurtas and salwar and turban. Why such an arrangement?

N.M: I like this androgyny on stage. I don't like to treat gender as a fixed entity. The women are wearing salwar and a little kurti and because there are in the kitchen I make them wear a little parna on top like an apron and you must like I am always telling my woman baal atain hain khane mein so just tie up your hair. So they all had tied up heads because chauke mein the, khana paros rahein hain (the food is being served to the audience). The play can completely get disturbed if the baal is floating around and you have pajamas since there is a lot of movement that the women do. So every artistic decision is also a practical one.

Me: If you could throw light on the Heth Vage Darya production.

N.M: It was not my first play but it was the first time I brought the folk and the urban actors together. It is a play based on the myth of Clytemnestra written by a playwright called Kamal Kapoor. It is really a very epic play. It was done in a certain way to say that the history had damned and judged Clytemnestra so

poorly. It was the reworking of the myth. I worked with Nek Chand and we designed a new theater in the rock garden which after that has never been used. It was only meant for this play.

Me: Also in all your plays barring Fida one sees multilayered narrative. They start with one story intervening into another.

N.M: I like that. I feel history should flow all over. Time should not be seen as a fixed entity. People go back and forth all the time. I am talking to you and thinking I have an appointment with my dentist at 2. The mind does function that way.

Me: It is in the late 80s that you started working. Do you feel that the feminist movement of the 60s and the 70s had any kind of impact on your sensibility?

N.M: No. It did not really. As I said the theatre is so much connected with the now. They did inspire us. They were women who stepped out of the house. I personally feel women are doing very exciting work. Maya Rao, Anuradha Kapur, Kirti Jain, Amal Allana, Veenapani Chawla, Anamika Haskar. They are not working in any similar way and yet they belong to similar family of minds. There is similarity of thought but all in bring in their own sensibilities, use different vocabularies.

Me: This is a point that I have come across in many articles. Many women directors are of the view that direction for them has been a necessity. Was it a necessity for you or did it come naturally to you?

N.M: I can only answer for myself. I think acting did not work for me. I was not comfortable on stage. I thought I wanted to be an actor because you could never be a director at that point in time. So they would say, "Haan ladki hai, acting karegi". There was something in me that was not able to give and then by accident

I started directing children's plays and I really enjoyed the scale and the space.

Me: I would also like to ask you how you manage your group since there is no official financial support.

N.M: It's a huge problem. I think it is by sheer will power. I mean I do get a grant from the ministry of culture which is very miniscule and half the time you don't get it. So that becomes the seat money. Then if I get a performance internationally then it becomes a little extra which goes into the bank to support future work. But somehow I don't know. Maybe without realizing it I am a great manager of money. Even when we have not worked for a long time I always have enough in my bank. Yesterday I had a designer in for the Norwegian play I am doing. She is talking about projection, door swinging, things flying and I am looking at her completely bamboozled. I said even I have the money since it is being commissioned by the Norwegian embassy, I can't deal with it. I like things which are jugad, rigged up in one hour and two hours. Also I don't relate to technology. I can't have slides.

Me: Is a space available for women in theatre today in Punjab?

N.M: The space might be available but the enthusiasm is not visible. Above all the lack of training and lack of infrastructure. I make an effort. I do hop across to witness what is happening around. I expose myself to the changes happening. What lacks among practitioners today I feel is this deficient consciousness. Even the theatre departments in the colleges don't have enough that contributes towards theatre as a whole. There still prevails a line of regressive thinking. It is part of the university structure and I think most universities feel that theatre is something absolutely dispensable. At least the Punjabi University, Patiala has money. Our department suffers from the paucity of funds. But the worst then that is, because the issue of funds has never stood in the way of creativity, the only people who can get a job are those who have done a PhD or passed UGC. To put that

constraint in a theatre department is to immediately block any talented people coming to teach. Infact, NSD was thinking of becoming a deemed university. I told them don't be idiots. You will loose your autonomy. Today the people who apply are all mediocre and I have no scruples about saying that. Now the real creative person what is he going to do if he wants to direct a play or act? It is not our jobs to sit and do PhDs. Our PhDs and our research papers are our productions which are never recognized by the UGC. If teachers don't know how to do workshops with actors, workshops in order to evolve new vocabulary. And today actors are not so much interested in text. They must know Brecht and others and their works but in the end he or she would have to translate it into practical way. It's like a catch 22 situation. It is completely pathetic.

Me: As a director what concerns would you like to address through your direction? And at the same time what kind of identity do you search through theatre?

N.M: Theatre is not a platform. It actually mediates about issues, about life, about betrayal, about hope. In a certain way it's a mediator. It is very difficult for me to say what kind of plays I would like to do it because it's a shifting reality. At this moment I am doing the Suit- a play based more on memory that actuality. Most decisions you take are sometimes not calculated. As for the identity, I don't seek one. It's like finding about the dimensions of your being through each work that you do. I work in a very obsessive manner. Now I am thinking of the new play so everything that I read or come across I try to relate it to my new work. Till the play is over and expunged from my system I am always seeking, what can inspire me. I just think that through the language of theatre that you have created through a production one can somewhere cross geographical barriers.

Me: On a final note, how have been the journey and the experience so far?

N.M: (With a smile). It has been wonderful. Theatre has given me everything. It

has given me identity, a wonderful environment to my children. You know, when my kids were three months four months, godi mein leke rehearsal pe ja rahi hun, taking them to Ujjain, because I was working at the bharat bhavan for many years. Everyone would get annoyed, you taking your kids, they might catch an infection. And I thought to myself I am giving my kids a lovely thing. I am giving them movement because when they were on my shoulder (laughs) I am kind of also enacting something so there is rhythm. I am giving them speech. I am giving them a sense of community and such wonderful experiences. Then it has given me an identity. The fact that you have come here is because of theater. I have had the best friends from theater like B.V Karanth. I feel his loss even today. It has given me a wonderful friend like Surjit Patar, my actors who are so committed. It has given me friendship, knowledge, a way of life and it has given my family also.

Me: What do you think is the future of Punjabi Theater and women in it?

N.M: Very poor. I have given twenty years of my life fighting to be accepted. The moment you say Punjabi theater nobody wants to invite you in the initial stages. As I told you last time when I moved from Bhopal to Chandigarh Karanthji said whichever language you work in should be the language of the state. It should be regional. So I have kept up that principal but I have not received any support from my own state government. I don't think they have ever sponsored a play of mine. Or for that matter acknowledged that I am working or I exist. That does not mean I need validation from them. In Manipur even when the state is in such turmoil it continues to support people like Ratan Thia. You look at Karanataka, Bombay, and Bengal. (*She calls out Shobha, the maid*)... For example now the NSD is planning to open regional centers but it has to be in support with your local state agencies which they have been approaching them. You think anyone in Punjab is bothered?

(I finish the interview with a piece of home-made cake).

CONCLUSION

It is in true sense an uphill task to piece together and write substantially about a subject like Punjabi drama and theatre in general, and women in Punjabi theatre in specific, especially when the situation has not been very favorable.¹³²

Nevertheless, it has been possible to create a viable and, at the same time, a resonant portrait of modern Punjabi theatre. It would not be wrong to aver that modern drama in Punjabi came to proscenium stage under the influence of western theatrical traditions, but as any other theatre it is also deeply rooted in its folk traditions, an amalgamation, quite **lucid** in many Punjabi productions. Hence, their inclusion above is significant for these popular traditions have come to impinge on modern Punjabi theatre very effectively. This blend between the folk and the urban brought a duality to theatre that still exists, growing side by side, feeding off and nourishing each other.

Evidently, urban theatre arrived in Punjabi language relatively late. Punjab's first leading dramatist, I.C. Nanda (1892-1961), wrote credibly about injustices in marriage and generational differences. The theatre culture started by the playwrights of initial phase was taken to the next level by renowned later playwrights like Sant Singh Sekhon, who polemicized on the dialects of class struggle, followed by Balwant Gargi's body of work that dealt with human passions and folk technique. The only woman practitioner to have utilized the space more effectively and in the process establish women's space as a central part of the theatrical tradition was Shiela Bhatia. She embarked on this journey in the late 1940s to be precise, a transformation that came about as a result of new developments in both artistic and political spheres namely in the form of IPTA.

As time progressed, throughout 1980s and 1990s, a range of groups and individuals drew further attention to the position of women in theatre and this

¹³² In terms of sources.

becomes visible in terms of the number of women who came to the forefront taking charge as directors, playwrights and in a mixture of other ways, redress the gender imbalance in the theatre. While many figured mostly as performers, there were few others who were inclined to direction. Neena Tiwana, Sunita Dhir and Navninder Behl (Patiala), Anita Shabdeesh (Mohali), Neelam Mansingh Chaudhary, Nirmal Rishi (Chandigarh), Neeta Mohindra¹³³ (Amritsar) and of course Shiela Bhatia (Delhi). However, at all points only a very small number made their influential mark.

In this sense, Neelam Mansingh's work holds special significance in the context of Punjabi theatre. Most of her productions may be adaptations and reworking of classics, but what enables them to stand out is the manner in which the scripts, the themes and the women characters have been dealt with. She clearly points out that the script is a basic yet comparatively a minor element of theatrical performance. What is performed may not always be entirely dependent on the content of the script. It is understood that the dramatic script is no more than a raw material from which the performance is created.¹³⁴ In this light, her body of work presents a truly memorable theatrical experience in which the various elements of performance are brought into a purposeful harmony. The orientation of the plays is such that it demands the creative cooperation of all (the artists), but one (the author). Having said that, Neelam Mansingh's plays may be defined as surreal, calling for return to myth and magic, and yet expose the deepest conflicts within the human mind. In terms of the absurd theatre, her productions seem to create a ritual like, mythological, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams.¹³⁵ It could be said that she belongs to a generation who could carry forward the established dramatic forms and test the possibilities of the new stage. Despite a genuine increase in the profile of women in Punjabi theatre, basic

¹³³ *Abhisarika* (1994), *Dusra Adhyay* (1996), *Mai Nee Main Kinu Akhya?* (2006), and *Gudia Ghar* (an adaptation of Ibsen's *Doll House*, 2007) are some of the plays directed by Neeta Mohindra.

¹³⁴ "The Art of Theatre" in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol.28, p.515, 1989.

¹³⁵ These characteristics are particularly visible in her plays *Nagamandala*, *Heth Wage Darya*, *Kitchen Katha*, and *Yerma*.

predominance of men in the theatre remains. But at the same time one can cogently argue that women practitioners have been prominent and have had the potent ability to influence theatre work with their individual signatures. Whether belonging to 'women's theatre' or 'feminist theatre', whether working in 'women's experimental theatre', terms fairly used in books and journalism to define the ways in which women have made their presence felt, they have positively utilized the space, harnessed the resources, and employed methods that may very well help them define the nature of their work. Very much aware of their gender and confines that gender as a term imposes, many have been able to transcend the gender boundaries and exercise their genuinely original imagination to surpass the differences. There is a common conviction shared amongst all that they identify with the female in society not merely because they are one themselves, but more importantly because they recognize the universal significance of the changes happening to her. This ability to empathize across the gender points the way forward.

The reason for drawing attention to the subject of women in theater is not out of any agenda to point out how unfair the theatre space has been to its women practitioners or how women figure in a tiny minority in one of culture's most vital art forms. On the contrary, the above study allows one to answer the question I had put before in the beginning about the extent to which the new dimensions, introduced in the early part of the theatre movement in the already existing structures of class relationship and gender relationship, were able to alter or transform those gender boundaries? Clearly, in this regard, interviews with some of the prominent women directors based in Punjab have proven to be of immense significance; especially, in an attempt to trace the trajectory and construct the experience of women practitioners in Punjabi theatre. Through an interactive process the idea was to indulge into a dialogue that helps one fill the gaps hitherto left blank, consciously or just pure indifference to accept that something worthwhile has been going on in theatre and that too with women on the forefront.

Having said that, I conducted interviews with five women directors based in different parts of Punjab. All grew up in what can be called an urban economy that was both fertile and resilient. All imbibed the best of education and were embraced with an environment that allowed them to make choices. I began with asking basic and open-ended questions such as ‘How and when did their interaction with theatre start?’ The conversation then led to asking them work related questions and in the process throwing light on their way of life, the networks of support and social relations. Especially the interview with Neena Tiwana, a successful theatre practitioner based in Patiala. She started her theatre adventure with her husband, the late Harpal Tiwana, and it is fascinating that her rendezvous continues at her age. During our conversation, there were moments when she would talk about everything from her childhood to her marriage, her in-laws, and how after marriage she would take her children along to the play-house so that she could finish pending work. There was no set chronological order as she went back and forth. Besides discussing her own work, there always remained a strong emphasis on her husband’s direction coupled with some valid and useful insights about Punjabi theatre. Infact, this applied to most of them. At one point or another they spoke about their identity not only as a professional theatre practitioner but also as a wife, a mother and a daughter and how these roles were part and parcel of their lives. A beginning and an end were clearly defined in the interviews. They were formal and yet informal in nature and that was evident in the comfort level they (interviewees) exuded and the interactiveness of the interviews itself that lends them a special character. An interesting feature that surfaced as a result was that while these women are well-trained in their respective areas as actresses and directors, their knowledge is more experiential and intuitive. Arthur Miller¹³⁶ opines and I quote, “The theatre is so endlessly fascinating because it’s so accidental. It is so much like life.” These women work in the same manner. They gather form their range of experiences and life in general that defines much of their work. More importantly, despite commonness in their answers, the interviewees brought certain personal and individual qualities

¹³⁶ An American Playwright (1915-2005).

to these interactions, which add to interviews' value. Coming back to Neena Tiwana, she probably treated this as an occasion to tell all the things she was longing to convey. All the participants might have agreed to partake for a variety of reasons but what is significant is the story or series of stories they had to tell. In this sense, their ideological and cultural perceptions had a different story to tell. At no point did I feel that they were answering in a passive, 'monosyllabic' way or making me feel as an outsider who is trying to invade their inner sanctum. Henceforth, what the study attempts to have revealed are the patterns of interplay between the consistent and fragmented aspects of identity, an interplay between the self and its multiple components, and the myriad building blocks out of which a particular individual is constructed.¹³⁷ As argued by Bozzoli, I take them as repositories of different components of consciousness and identity.

Another interesting facet of the theatre in Punjab that has been conveyed by these women practitioners was that they all identify Punjabi theatre with the amateur theatre world and its capability to succeed devoid of any financial or infrastructural support to theatre enterprise as a whole. Moreover, the ways in which women have established themselves in the theatre. For instance, they pointed out that when they first started out as actresses in 1970s and 80s, there were certain apprehensions still prevailing in society about women from respectable families performing on stage. However, given the family support they received, they consider themselves fortunate that a legitimate stage existed where women could pursue artistic ambitions. It also became a place where they could speak out in a socially conscious and acceptable format. Despite the change that has taken place over the course of years, the current situation lacks quality. Even when the environment is women friendly, if I can say so, the efforts have to come from within. On the contrary, they feel that far more important than the gender debate is how to sustain a basic level of quality in theatre. Given the individual circumstances that surrounded them, many have been able to communicate their

¹³⁷ Belinda Bozzoli, "Interviewing the Women of Phokeng", in *The Oral History Reader* ed., Robert Perkins and Alistair Thompson, Routledge, 2006, p163.

thoughts very convincingly. In an effort to bring new plays to the stage and some infusing new life to those of the past these women practitioners rediscovered imaginative possibilities of theatre.

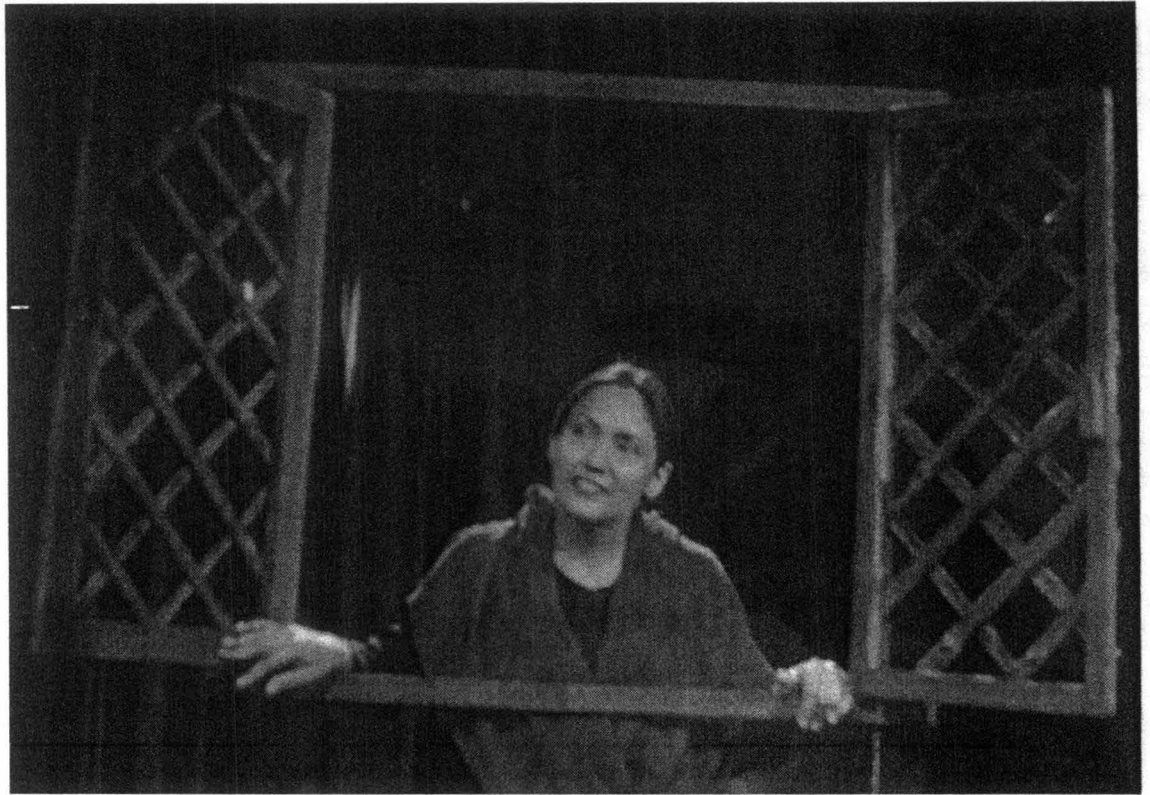
Earlier considered as poor cousin of cinema, Punjabi theatre seems to have arrived on its own. Commercialization of theatre is gradually changing the conventionally perceived dismissive picture of theatre artists living hand-to-mouth. While practitioners across Punjab seem to be lamenting about the funding system not properly organized, there are also those who believe that theatre is attracting slow investment. Sponsorships are coming in the form of various projects funded by foreign embassies and other corporate organizations. Neeta Mohindra points out that “Its not that grants are not available. It’s just that I have never applied for any. Maybe I have been lazy in approaching them. I am not good at marketing and this is a big minus point.” She is of the opinion that theatre scene is very vibrant and Amritsar, in particular, provides for an active centre. But it’s true potential may only be realized if it (theatre) was recognized as an enterprising industry and not something taken up by people solely as an amateur activity. Others are of the view that what is required is perhaps a serious search for standards. Particularly, in Punjab there seems to be that various fractions are working individually at various levels. Especially in case of women practitioners in Punjab, they work separately, each with her idea and idiom, so different from each other that their ways do not appear to have affinity in terms of theatre strategy. They have little in common except their commitment to theatre. In this sense, perhaps collaboration between women practitioners will churn out more productive work in the future as theatre for many remains a passion and mode of self-expression and self-exploration.

In lieu of conclusion, it could be convincingly argued that one does not have to always interpret the study of women practitioners in theatre as the invariant ‘other’ of male history, literary tradition, form and ideology.¹³⁸ In a sense, it tends

¹³⁸ Sunder Rajan.1993 .p3.

to segregate women's work from that of their male counterparts and therefore seems to exclude them from the mainstream and pointing towards formation of an alternative theatre.¹³⁹ Both with reference to Punjab and in the generic sense as well, one witnesses a vast shift in sensibility towards handling of various issues. Particularly amongst the not so new, and yet ever so fresh crop of women dramatists like Anuradha Kapur, Amal Allana, Anamika Haksar, Tripurari Sharma, and coupling with them, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhary. They allow their female characters the right to feel and the space to live those feelings. Most of the productions can be seen as transformations from ideality to reality; from the depiction of idealized characters towards an increasingly evolved sense of the 'individuation' of character- presenting the individual protagonist attempting to attain wholeness of a person in her autonomous space. Dropping the rhetoric of historical, plays by women practitioners often prefer everyday speech rhythms in order to produce credible portraits of life both in urban and rural life. Performing issues such as motherhood, sexuality, among others, maybe seen as breaking a silence that hitherto surrounded crucial aspects of women's lives. All the voices might reflect upon a variety of experiences, but they all share certain common aims, that is, all share a commitment to find spaces, languages and idioms for their kind of theatre. They have actively and persistently pursued their art, their vision, their passion, defying convention, exploding myths, contradicting stereotypes and sometimes simply entertaining. They have done so in the past and they continue to follow and in the process reinvent theatrical experience.

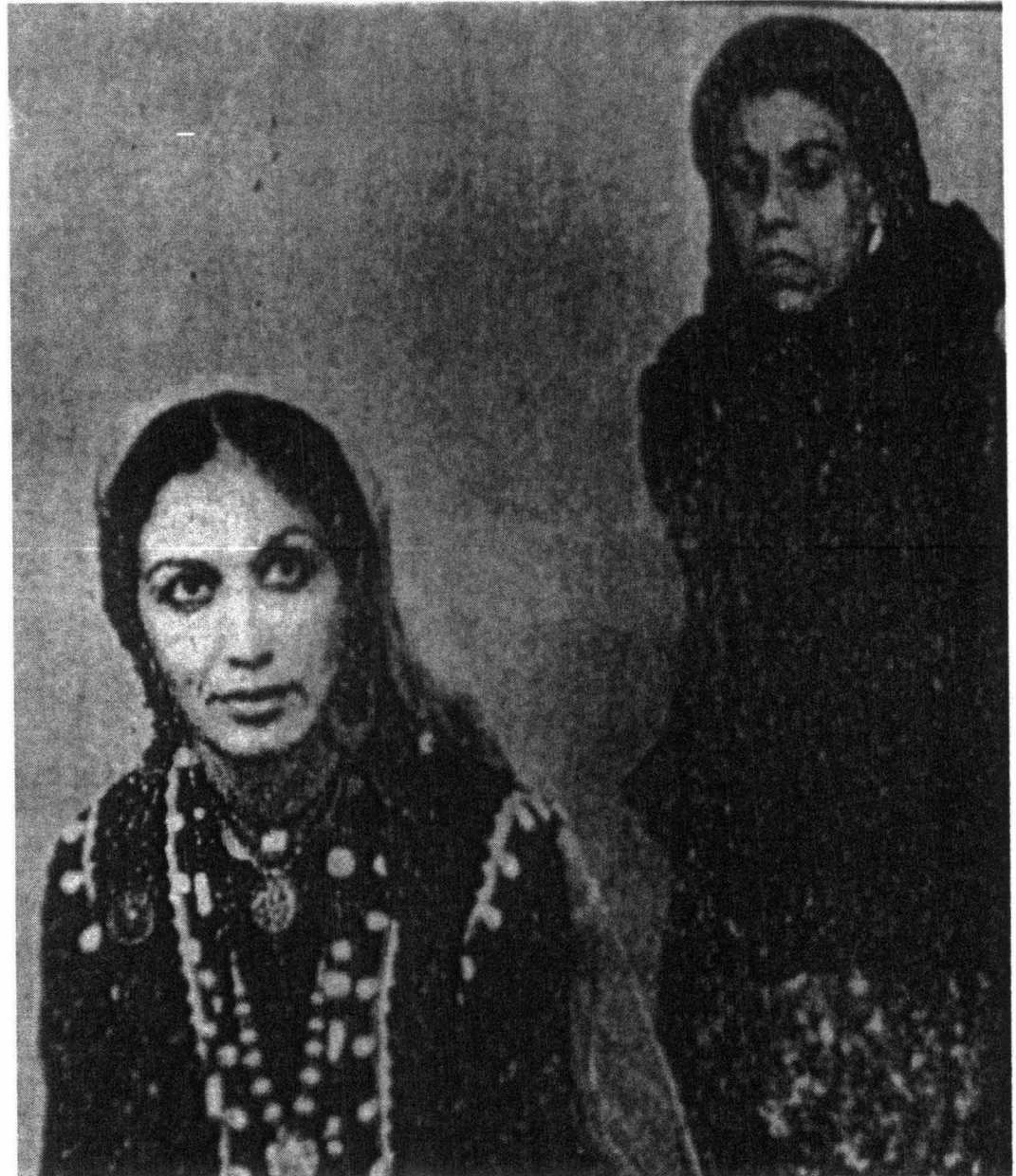
¹³⁹ Infact. many women practitioners are averse to this segregation for they believe their gender is incidental when it comes to directing. Many are of the opinion that it's an individual rather than the male versus woman thing. Perhaps women are better attuned to the egos, the frailties. and the frustrations of other women. It helps to know the female psyche closely.



Neeta Mohindra acted and directed 'Buhe Barian' (Doors and Windows) (2001)



'Mee te o Bachee haan', a street play directed by Neeta Mohindra



Neena Tiwana and Nirmal Rishi in 'Masseya Di Raat' by Harpal Tiwana; Courtesy Neena Tiwana



'Diva Bale Sari Raat', an adaptation of Lorca's Yerma; Courtesy Neena Tiwana

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